REMARKS ON THE ETHNONYM *GETICUS* IN GENOESE SOURCES FROM THE BLACK SEA REGION

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Résumé : L'article étudie la signification du terme médiéval *Geticus* utilisé dans les sources génoises concernant les alentours de la mer Noire à la fin du Moyen Âge. Les historiens ont soutenu que ce terme faisait référence aux Goths, aux Circassiens ou même aux Roumains. Après avoir brièvement discuté les principales théories explicatives qui ont été précédemment avancées, l'auteur apporte des arguments en faveur de l'identification de la population de *Getici* avec les Circassiens qui demeurent dans la région du Caucase du Nord.

Abstract: The article analyses the meaning of the medieval term *Geticus* used in the Genoese sources regarding the Black Sea region at the end of the Middle Ages. The historians argued that this term refers to the Goths, to the Circassians, or even to the Romanians. After briefly discussing the main explanatory theories that have been previously put forward, the author provides arguments for identifying the *Getici* population with the Circassians who live in the Northwestern Caucasus region.

Mots-clés : *Geticus*, Gênes, Mer Noire, Goths, Circassiens, Roumains
Keyword: *Geticus*, Genoa, Black Sea, Goths, Circassians, Romanians

One can hardly avoid noticing that the medieval sources on the history of the Black Sea region contain many rare and ambiguous words, which still await a satisfactory analysis and explanation. Many of these obscure terms relate to trade items or place names, while others serve to designate various local populations. The majority of available sources for the period between the 13th and the 15th centuries bear a Genoese origin, as the Ligurian commune successfully established a dense network of commercial settlements around the Pontic basin during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. Despite the significant loss of written sources produced in these Pontic settlements, the close administrative, commercial, and political ties with the metropolis of Genoa enabled a consistent portion of these sources to reach Genoa and hence to be preserved in the rich archives of the city.

When the systematic examination of this body of evidence commenced, some of the obscure terms found in the Genoese sources, such as *lingua romecha*

or *seta de Chilea,* were initially linked to the medieval history of Romanians, and these hypotheses stirred much discussion amongst the historians. Once thought to refer to the old Romanian language, the reference to the *lingua romecha* from a Genoese notarial deed drawn up in the Danubian emporium of Kilia (*Chilia* in Romanian) turned out to actually designate a regional language called *ruméka*, which is still spoken in some parts of present-day Ukraine and Georgia, and is composed of a Crimean Greek dialect with various elements from Tartar, Arabic, Persian, and Ukrainian[1].

By the same token, a Genoese document relating to the 13th-century silk commerce mentions a certain type of silk named *seta de Chilea,* and this toponym was originally related to the settlement of Kilia on the Danube, but a more thorough analysis revealed that this type of silk came in fact from the Bithynian city of *Chelae*[2]. More recently, the Latin term *Geticus* employed by the Genoese sources followed a quite similar historiographical path. Thus, an attempt to reopen the question of the meaning that lies behind this ambiguous ethnonym, which, as we shall see, received contradictory answers, might not be entirely fruitless.

Before briefly addressing the current state of research, one should bear in mind that the term *Geticus* appears in both historical and literary sources produced by the Genoese during the 15th century. The most famous example taken from the aforementioned literary genre is assuredly represented by the work of Alberto Alfieri, a Genoese citizen who settled in the Crimean emporium of Caffa in the early 15th century. His only surviving work, entitled *Ogdoas* (from the Greek word for "eight"), consists of eight dialogues carried on various themes between the souls of several prominent deceased nobles from the Italian Peninsula. This text also contains three brief references to the ethnonym *Geticus*:

> (1) *Quis Scytha tam ferus? Quis Getes, aut quis incolens caspia regna?*
> "What Scythian was so ferocious? What Getan? Or who among those living in the Caspian regions?"
> (2) *Potius te manem factitabunt, tibi in Scythia urbes aut oppida aedificabunt? An tibi apud Geticos dominabuntur?*
> "Indeed, will they act as a protective force for you, will they build cities and fortresses in the land of the Scythians for you? Will they rule over the Getans for you?"
> (3) *Quid Geticos referam infelices, quorum numerus potentior in Ægypto, quam in solo natali?*

[1] Michel BALARD, "Un document génois sur la langue roumaine en 1360", in *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes,* vol. XVIII, no. 2, 1980, pp. 233–238; Andrei PIPPIDI, "«Romecha»", in *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes,* vol. XXIV, no. 3, 1986, pp. 287–288. See also more recently Vasile MARCULEȚ, "Considerații cu privire la limbile utilizate în realizarea tranzacțiilor comerciale din cadrul coloniilor genoveze de la gurile Dunării la mijlocul secolului al XIV-lea", in *Sargetia. Acta Musei Devensis,* voll. XXXV–XXXVI, 2007–2008, pp. 199–200 (although without yielding any new insights).

[2] Pierre RACINE, "Le marché génois de la soie en 1288", in *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes,* vol. VIII, no. 3, 1970, pp. 406–408, 416; see also Nicolae BĂNESCU, "Chilia (Licostomo) und das bithynische Χηλή", in *Byzantinische Zeitschrift,* vol. 28, 1928, pp. 68–72; Octavian ILIESCU, "À la recherche de Kilia byzantine", in *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes,* vol. XVI, no. 2, 1978, p. 231; Silvia BARASCHI, "Izvoare scrise privind așezările dobrogene de la malul Dunării", in *Revista de Istorie,* tom 34, no. 2, 1981, pp. 323–324.

> "What shall I say of the unhappy Getans, whose number is larger in Egypt than in their native land?"[3].

The textual context of these rhetorical questions greatly helps us to explain the quoted passages. In the first one, the cruelty of a great Italian noble is rhetorically compared with the barbarism displayed by the allegedly uncivilised peoples who live around the Black Sea basin. The second passage is part of an ample plea in favour of the restoration of the political greatness of the Genoese government, which was absorbed by local conflicts and, as a consequence, tended to neglect the administration of the Pontic settlements. Finally, the last passage refers to the fact that many individuals from among this population were sold on the market as slaves and ultimately ended up serving their masters in the Mamluk Sultanate of Egypt. But one may reasonably ask who were these *Getici?*

In an essay based on the late 14th-century financial records of the Genoese Caffa, the Russian historian Andrej L. Ponomarev considered that the form *Geticus* employed in the Genoese accounts represents an "antiquated ethnonym" denoting the "Vlacho-Romanians" that once lived in the city of Caffa[4]. More recently, in Evgeny Khvalkov's PhD thesis[5], as well as in the published version of this dissertation[6], we come across the following passage: "people from Wallachia and Moldova were certain to be found in Caffa. Nonetheless, we occasionally find people with the describer *Geticus* or *Gethicus,* which is an antiquated term for Wallachians. Thus the Wallachians were part of the population of Caffa. We will need further research to give a final answer; however we would agree with Ponomarev that the Wallachians were part of the population of Caffa. In *Massaria Caffae* 1461, for instance, there is a mention of a certain *Asaus Geticus,* who was an *orguxius Caffe".*

The sole piece of evidence that the Russian historians Ponomarev and Khvalkov invoke in order to bear out the identification of these *Getici* with the Wallachians is represented by the Latin passage *Velachie sive ex Geticorum* from a Genoese document edited by Sandra Origone[7]. In the cited document, a certain

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[3] Antonio CERUTI, "L'Ogdoas di Alberto Alfieri. Episodii di storia genovese nei primordii del secolo XV", in *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria,* vol. XVII, 1885, pp. 297, 301, 313. For the modern translation used here, see *The Ogdoas of Alberto Alfieri,* edited and translated by Carla P. Weinberg, E. Ann Matter, Tempe, Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011, pp. 133, 143, 169.

[4] Andrej Leonidovič PONOMAREV, "Население и территория генуэзской Каффы по данным бухгалтерской книги массарии – казначейства за 1381–1382 гг.", in vol. *The Black Sea Region in the Middle Ages,* vol. IV, Sankt Petersburg, Aletejja, 2000, p. 357, fn. 78.

[5] Ievgen Alexandrovitch KHVALKOV, *The Colonies of Genoa in the Black Sea Region: Evolution and Transformation,* vol. I (PhD thesis, European University Institute, Department of History and Civilization), 2015, p. 237, and fn. 1294.

[6] Evgeny KHVALKOV, *The Colonies of Genoa in the Black Sea Region. Evolution and Transformation,* New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 205, and fn. 195 (p. 271).

[7] Sandra ORIGONE, "L'amministrazione genovese a Caffa nel secolo XV", in *Saggi e documenti,* vol. III, Genova, Civico Istituto Colombiano, 1983, doc. 90, p. 292. Both Ponomarev and Khvalkov misquote here another collection of documents.

Simon de Levanto purchases millet from the commune of Caffa in exchange for which he will have to pay using the millet he plans to acquire in the near future "from the Tartar steppe, from Brăila of the Romanian lands or from *Getici"* (*campanie Tartarorum, Brilagi Velachie sive ex Geticorum*)[8]. In short, these lists represent enumerations of places and peoples considered to be appropriate sources for future purchases of cereals. There is no equivalence that can be found between Wallachia and *Getici* in this document. All these geographic points of reference were rather presented as possible alternatives for grain supply. To put it plainly, the only argument that ostensibly supported the hypothesis that the ethnonym *Geticus* might be referring to the Romanians of the late Middle Ages appears to be completely erroneous under closer scrutiny. Currently, there are no historical sources dating from the 13th to the 15th centuries that might help us to maintain such a bold and ill-founded hypothesis. Although it is true that the Genoese records produced by the administration of Caffa frequently mention Romanian inhabitants of the city, they are invariably identified by the word *Vellachus* (in fact, this term may function either as an ethnonym, referring to Romanians, or as an indication that the individual in question is legally subject to the lords of *Vellachia*)[9], thereby suggesting that the term *Geticus* must have referred to a separate community.

If they were not Romanians, then who were these *Getici?* Setting aside the woolly-minded statements of Ponomarev and Khvalkov, there are currently two main theories in the historiography. The first theory, whose main proponent is Wilhelm von Heyd, asserts that *Getici* were Circassians ("peuplades de race tcherkesse") from the North Caucasus region[10]. A second theory, whose supporters include Nicolae Iorga and Gian Giacomo Musso, posits that these *Getici* were the Goths of Crimea[11]. Based on the available evidence, it appears to us that the first theory is the most accurate one, and we shall present arguments to support this interpretation. It would be beneficial to commence by revisiting the explanations that have previously been offered regarding the matter at hand. In 1899, N. Iorga commented upon a passage, extracted from the 1446 accounts of Caffa's *Massaria* (*…exenium unum factum Usdemoroch, olim domino Getichorum, quando venit ad tres montaniolas…*), stating that this *dominus Getichorum "est un chef des Goths,*

[8] *Ibid.* See also Ștefan ANDREESCU, "Noi știri despre exportul de cereale prin Cetatea Albă și gurile Dunării (prima jumătate a secolului al XV-lea)", in *Studii și materiale de istorie medie,* vol. XX, 2002, p. 325, republished in Ștefan ANDREESCU, *Izvoare noi cu privire la istoria Mării Negre,* București, Institutul Cultural Român, 2005, pp. 61–68.

[9] See some examples published by Nicolae BĂNESCU, "Vechi legături ale țărilor noastre cu genovezii", in *Închinare lui Nicolae Iorga cu prilejul împlinirii vârstei de 60 de ani*, Cluj, Editura Institutului de Istorie Universală, 1931, pp. 33–34.

[10] Wilhelm von HEYD, *Histoire du commerce du Levant au Moyen Âge,* vol. II, Leipzig, Otto Harrassowitz, 1886, p. 394.

[11] Nicolae IORGA, *Notes et extraits pour servir à l'histoire des croisades au XV^e siècle,* tome I, Paris, Ernest Leroux, éditeur, 1899, p. 38, and fn. 8; Gian Giacomo MUSSO, "Il tramonto di Caffa genovese", in *Miscellanea di Storia Ligure in memoria di Giorgio Falco,* Genova, Università di Genova, 1966, p. 323, and fn. 21: *…trattandosi di Goti di Crimea, più volte comparenti, negli atti notarili e nei registri delle Massarie, anche come Iheti, Geti, etc.*

inconnu par ailleurs"[12]. But this chieftain named *Usdemoroch* is actually one of the well-known Circassian lords from the North Caucasus region[13]. More recently, in 2011, Sandra Origone, while discussing the various populations that inhabited the Black Sea area during the Middle Ages, offered the following explanation concerning the *Getici* population: *"fanno fede, tra gli altri, i getici, etnonimo usato per indicare non solo circassi e saraceni, spesso schiavi, ma anche ebrei, controparti mercantili di veneziani a Tana"*[14]. As can be seen, the author ascribes a much broader meaning to this term; nonetheless, we do not recall encountering any references in the preserved sources to Saracens or Jews from the Pontic region identified by the ethnonym *Geticus.*

Besides the already mentioned *Asaus Geticus*, one might also discover in Caffa's financial accounts other names of *Getici*, such as *Toctamis Geticus*[15], *Sanctibei Geticus*[16], *Sepsos Geticus*[17] or *Tengriberdi Geticus*[18]. However, it stands to reason that these personal names do not allow precise geographic or ethnic identifications, especially when the medieval anthroponymy of the Pontic region has not yet been satisfactorily studied. Significant effort will be necessary to extract from the preserved sources all personal names attested in the Black Sea region prior to the Ottoman conquest in order to categorise them into ethnocultural and geographic groups and to propose a thoughtful and nuanced theory concerning their origins, evolution, and dissemination. In what follows, we shall briefly analyse three Genoese sources which underpin the fact that these *Getici* were geographically located in the Northwest Caucasian region.

The first document, published by Amedeo Vigna, provides an extensive account of the political, economic and social circumstances in the northern Black Sea that

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[12] N. IORGA, *op. cit.*, p. 38, fn. 8, who was also referenced by Alexander A. VASILIEV, *The Goths in the Crimea,* Cambridge, The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1936, p. 223. It seems, however, that Vasiliev was hesitant to fully accept Iorga's identification, since in the index of his book Vasiliev wrote "Usdemoroch (?), ruler of the Goths (?)" (p. 292). In order to *serve some genealogical purposes*, another historian erroneously stated that this Circassian lord was actually named Melchisedec… (Ștefan S. GOROVEI, "«Maria Asanina Paleologhina, Doamna Moldovlahiei» (I)", in *Studii și materiale de istorie medie,* vol. XXII, 2004, pp. 26–27).

[13] Cornelio DESIMONI, "Nuovi studi sull'Atlante Luxoro", in *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria,* vol. V, 1867, p. 185: *Signori Getici, Usdemoroch, Jamoch, Costumoch, Cadibeldi, ecc., onde ci parlano i nostri documenti, stanziavano forse nelle baie o anse di Sugiuk-Kalé, di Ghelendcik e di Pciade;* Samir H. KHOTKO, *Черкесия: генезис, этнополитические связи со странами Восточной Европы и Ближнего Востока (XIII–XVI вв.),* Maykop, Adygejskoe respublikanskoe knižnoe izdatel'stvo, 2017, pp. 165–166, 190.

[14] Sandra ORIGONE, "Guerra e società nel Mar Nero: il confronto tra genovesi e veneziani", in *Proceedings of the 22nd International Congress of Byzantine Studies. Sofia, 22–27 August 2011,* vol. I, *Plenary Papers,* ed. Iliya Georgiev Iliev, Sofia, St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 2011, p. 437.

[15] Alexander DZHANOV, "Книга Масарії Кафи 1441–1442 pp.", in *Ucrainica Mediaevalia,* vol. 4, 2021, p. 328.

[16] Alexander DZHANOV, "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг. (по данным книг массарии Каффы)", in *Sougdaia Collection,* vol. VIII, no. 2, 2019, p. 201.

[17] *Idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и соседние государства в 1456–1459 гг. (по данным книг массарии Каффы)", in *Sougdaia Collection,* vol. VIIII, no. 3–4, 2021, p. 334.

[18] ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI GENOVA, San Giorgio, Sala 34, 590, 1248 (new repository code: 18,59046 1248), *Massaria Caffae* 1465–1466, fol. 71^{v}.

was drafted by the government of Caffa and dispatched to Genoa. This account is dating from May 1471 and incorporates the following passage:

> *Propter multas avarias et discrimina que annuatim Getici in Copario impendunt nostris mercatoribus et hominibus, sunt dies quod consultum fuit proibere nemo hoc anno accedat ad Coparium, pro posse cum ipsis Geticis ad alliquod acordium cum cautione devenire, quia perseverando in predictis in fine dampna sequerentur. Hoc anno cogitamus posse intentum nostrum faciliter aquirere quia sunt ipsi Getici vacui sale sine qua pisces sui non possunt perservari*[19].
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> "Due to the numerous hardships and dangers that the *Getici* impose annually upon our merchants and people in Coparium, it has recently been decided that no one shall be permitted to approach Coparium this year, so as to cautionally reach some agreements with these *Getici*, since if we keep persisting in the aforementioned matters, losses will ultimately ensue. This year we believe that we can more easily achieve our intention because the *Getici* themselves are lacking in salt, without which their fish cannot be preserved" (our translation).

Hence, the quoted passage refers to the population of *Getici* from the region of the Copa city (Copario, Coparium, "near the mouth of the Kuban, the Genoese founded a colony called Copa (Kopa), which was linking the sea to the Circassian countryside"[20]), who are depicted as natives of the aforesaid region, and with whom the Genoese are trying to settle several local disputes.

The second source worth bringing to the attention of the readers is represented by a letter written on April 13, 1472, on behalf of Zaccaria Ghizolfi, the Genoese senior of Matrega, and addressed to the Genoese personnel of the *Ufficio di San Giorgio* that administered at the time the settlements dependent upon Genoa from the Black Sea region. In a similar vein, the text of this epistle also mentions the population of *Getici* that dwelled in the Taman Peninsula, whose vicinity (*vicinitatem dominorum et populorum Geticorum*) sometimes created great troubles for the lord of Matrega[21].

A third document, which reinforces this conclusion, was firstly published in the volume IV of *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria*[22], and subsequently Ștefan Andreescu re-examined the document in the archives of Genoa and thoroughly

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[19] Amedeo VIGNA, *Codice diplomatico delle colonie tauro-liguri durante la signoria dell'Ufficio di S. Giorgio*, tomo II, part. I, Genova, Tipografia del R.I. de Sordo-Muti, 1871, doc. DCCCCLXXXI, p. 779.

[20] Matteo SALONIA, *Genoa's Freedom: Entrepreneurship, Republicanism, and the Spanish Atlantic*, London, Lexington Books, 2017, p. 17. See also Jolanta Tł. KORNECKA, Rafał QUIRINI-POPŁAWSKI, "Occidentalizzazione dell'area del bacino del Mar Nero nel tardo medioevo", in *Quaestiones Medii Aevi Novae*, vol. 11, 2006, p. 254.

[21] A. VIGNA, *op. cit.*, doc. MXV, p. 844; Samir H. KHOTKO, "Circassian Principalities in the XIV–XV Centuries. Formation and Interrelation with Sub-Ethnic Groups", in *Historical and Social Educational Ideas*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2016, pp. 47–48, 51–52.

[22] It was printed by Luigi Tommaso BELGRANO, "Appendice", in *Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria*, vol. IV, 1866, pp. CCLVII–CCLVIII.

analysed it[23]. It is a letter written from the Taman Peninsula by the same Zaccaria Ghizolfi, the former senior of Matrega, dated August 12, 1482, and addressed to the commune of Genoa. On that occasion, Ghizolfi was inside the rural area of the Taman Peninsula, and because he had no fortifications behind which he could shelter, he was vulnerable to the pressures of the local Circassian lords (*sono alla Campagna sine ullo fortilicio e questi signori getici continue me mangiano*).

From the foregoing, it can be seen that the local population named *Getici* in the Genoese sources has no connection with the Romanian-speaking population of the medieval period. On the one hand, given the sources we have discussed so far, we think it may be reasonably concluded that these *Getici* were Circassians from the Northwest Caucasian region[24]. On the other hand, once we accept the general idea that the *Getici* population was part of the Circassian ethnic group, then the ethnic differences between the Goths of Crimea and the *Getici* settled in the regions east of the Crimean Peninsula, differences which were chiefly manifested through language and customs, may be easily explained[25]. The preserved documents attest that this population lived primarily on the Taman Peninsula. Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact that the sources analysed here were written either from the perspective of the administration of Caffa or from that of the lord of Matrega. As a result, they offer us an over-simplified and highly circumstantial view of the actual region inhabited by this population. Needless to say, it remains a mystery that awaits further elucidation how exactly this population came to bear the name *Getici* in the Genoese sources of the late Middle Ages. The explanation may however be more closely connected to the ancient population names known to the Genoese through Italian Renaissance culture, rather than to the manner in which the Circassians referred to themselves. It is a widely accepted fact that medieval sources frequently attribute ancient names to certain populations of the Middle Ages that bear no relation to their counterparts from Antiquity.

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[24] See also E.S. ZEVAKIN, N.A. PENČKO, "Ricerche sulla storia delle colonie genovesi nel Caucaso occidentale nei secoli XIII–XV", in *Miscellanea di studi storici*, vol. I, Genova, Fratelli Bozzi, 1969, pp. 51, 53, 71, 73, 79 (translated into Italian by Maria Teresa Dellacasa).

[25] See especially Alexander A. VASILIEV, *op. cit.*, pp. 60, 165, 281.

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