THE EAST EUROPEAN SILK COMMERCE WITH CENTRAL ASIA AFTER THE DOWNFALL OF TAMERLANE

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Résumé : L'étude présente examine les relations commerciales entretenues entre l'Asie centrale et les alentours de la mer Noire au cours du XV^e^ siècle. Après avoir résumé les principales théories historiographiques qui soutiennent l'idée générale que le commerce de la soie entre l'Orient et les ports pontiques a quasiment cessé à la suite des campagnes militaires de Tamerlan, l'auteur entreprend un examen critique de plusieurs termes latins obscurs, trouvés dans les registres administratifs tenus par les Génois à Caffa, qui désignent des variétés d'étoffes de soie de type *camocatus,* telles que *camocatus kufteri, camocatus sarancha, camocatus besbades* et *camocatus sepai.* L'analyse de cette terminologie latine, associée aux autres données tirées de diverses sources, permet de conclure que, bien que sur une échelle réduite, les activités commerciales unissant l'Asie centrale et le bassin pontique ont perduré tout au long du XV^e^ siècle.

Abstract: The present article explores the trade relations between Central Asia and the Black Sea region during the fifteenth century. After a summary of the main historiographical theories that endorse the general idea that the silk commerce between the Orient and the Pontic ports ceased almost entirely following the military pursuits of Tamerlane, the author embarks on a critical examination of several obscure Latin terms, found in the administrative registers kept by the Genoese in Caffa, which designate silk varieties of *camocatus,* such as *camocatus kufteri, camocatus sarancha, camocatus besbades* and *camocatus sepai.* The analysis of this Latin terminology coupled with other insights gleaned from diverse source materials allows the conclusion that, albeit on a diminished scale, the trading activities uniting Central Asia and the Pontic basin continued throughout the fifteenth century.

Mots-clés : *camocatus,* mer Noire, Asie centrale, Caffa génoise, commerce, soie, Tamerlan
Keywords: *camocatus,* Black Sea, Central Asia, Genoese Caffa, trade, silk, Tamerlane

The extensive commercial networks established between the Italian merchant communities and the Asian trade centres of the Mongol Empire during the second

half of the thirteenth century significantly increased the circulation of oriental goods inside the Black Sea basin, which eventually served as a pivotal point of convergence in the international trade for over two hundred years[1]. It is common knowledge that silk was one of the principal merchandises coming from the East and entering Europe on this occasion[2]. Whereas the latter part of the thirteenth century and much of the ensuing century are commonly regarded as a period during which trade in luxury goods between Europe and the Orient greatly prospered, the history of the fifteenth century is often seen as an age of economic downturn, being characterised by a marked decline and, according to some voices, even a total cessation of these commercial exchanges. In accordance with the conventional perspective, Tamerlane's bloody and tumultuous wars are traditionally believed to have decisively severed the commercial ties between Central Asia and the Black Sea region. As a consequence, it has been widely posited that the silk commodities circulating on the markets of Eastern Europe during the fifteenth century could entirely be attributed either to the silk production of the Ottoman Empire that already flourished in Bursa and in Constantinople, or to the northward reexportation of silk fabrics originating from the more southerly regions of Syria and Egypt.

First of all, it is necessary to provide the readers with a more comprehensive description of this dominant historiographical interpretation concerning the economic landscape of the fifteenth-century Black Sea basin. In a paper read at an international maritime history conference held in 1962, Marian Małowist, a renowned Polish historian, contended that the rationale behind the merchants who opted to acquire oriental goods from Egypt or Syria, instead of seeking them on the markets situated along the coasts of the Black Sea, could be elucidated by two main causes, namely *la décadence des grandes routes asiatiques qui liaient la mer Noire à l'Asie Centrale après les ravages causés par l'invasion de Tamerlan et la longue décomposition des États timourides*[3]. During another prominent maritime history congress that took place in 1966, two other scholars, Robert-Henri Bautier[4] and

[1] See especially the pioneering works of Gheorghe I. BRĂTIANU, "La mer Noire, plaque tournante du trafic international à la fin du Moyen Âge", *Revue Historique du Sud-Est Européen,* vol. XXI, 1944, pp. 36–69, and *idem, La mer Noire des origines à la conquête ottomane*, München, Societatea Academică Română, 1969, pp. 185–300, and also an equally useful introduction by Mihai BERZA, "La mer Noire à la fin du Moyen Âge. Vue générale", *Balcania,* vol. IV, 1941, pp. 426–433, republished in *De la Méditerranée à la mer Noire*, édition établie et présentée par Andrei Pippidi, Brăila, Editura Istros, 2020, pp. 263–290.

[2] For a recent overview, see Patricia BLESSING, Elizabeth Dospěl WILLIAMS, Eiren L. SHEA, *Medieval Textiles across Eurasia, c. 300–1400*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023.

[3] Marian MALOWIST, "Les routes du commerce et les marchandises du Levant dans la vie économique de la Pologne au bas Moyen Âge et au début de l'époque moderne", in *Méditerranée et Océan Indien. Travaux du Sixième Colloque International d'Histoire Maritime (Venise, 20–24 septembre 1962)*, édités par les soins de Christiane Villain-Gandossi et de Manlio Cortelazzo, Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N., 1970, p. 166.

[4] Robert-Henri BAUTIER, "Les relations économiques des Occidentaux avec les pays d'Orient, au Moyen Âge. Points de vue et documents", in *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce en Orient et dans l'Océan Indien. Actes du huitième Colloque International d'Histoire maritime (Beyrouth, 5–10 septembre 1966)*, présentés par Michel Mollat, Paris, S.E.V.P.E.N., 1970, p. 278, republished in *Commerce méditerranéen et banquiers italiens au Moyen Âge*, Aldershot, Variorum, 1992, no. IV.

Édouard Baratier[5], articulated an analogous viewpoint. The increasing importance in the European distribution of silk fabrics assumed by several urban centres located in Syria, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire led to a prevailing tendency among historians to depict the Pontic silk trade in an overly simplistic manner. This fifteenth-century commerce was frequently portrayed as a unidirectional flow of silk products from the territories of the Ottoman Empire to the northern and western coastal areas of the Black Sea. For instance, the grand historian Michel Balard noted that

> dans les années qui suivent le passage de Tamerlan, les routes de l'Inde et de la Chine sont bel et bien coupées. Seul subsiste au XV^e^ siècle un mince filet du courant asiatique des épices et de la soie, celui qui passe par Brousse, rejoint Kilia puis, par l'intermédiaire des marchands saxons et transylvains, emprunte les routes de Valachie et de Moldavie vers l'Europe centrale et la Pologne[6].

This general interpretation is further underscored in a recent work by the same historian:

> in the last decades of the fourteenth century, the route of Romania and the Black Sea loses its importance, as the new one which leads to Syria and Alexandria grows once more… At the beginning of the fifteenth century, only a small trickle of trade in silk of regional origin and in spices survives in the Pontic ports, while a new current of trade is established from Bursa to Moncastro and the Moldavian route. Oriental silks exported from the Black Sea become a 'curiosity' (Jacques Heers). Regional trade from the hinterland predominates and coastal trading posts check most of it. Caffa becomes the outlet for the Russian plains, the port of cereals, fish, salt, and caviar[7].

Although the decline of trade relations in the Black Sea region during the fifteenth century is obvious to the naked eye, it is worth pondering over two postulates articulated by Balard, namely that the replacement of oriental silk with "silk of regional origin" in the Pontic trade was an almost complete and markedly evident process, and that Bursa assumed without competition the dominant role in the silk supply of the Black Sea basin.

In a seminal contribution published in 1994, Halil İnalcık sealed this view with evidence extracted from the Ottoman archives. In much the same vein, İnalcık drew attention to "the importation of large quantities of silk, cotton, and hemp manufactures

[5] Édouard BARATIER, "L'activité des Occidentaux en Orient au Moyen Âge", in *Sociétés et compagnies de commerce*, p. 337.

[6] Michel BALARD, "Gênes et la mer Noire (XIII^e^–XV^e^ siècles)", *Revue Historique*, vol. CCLXX, no. 1, 1983, p. 39, republished in *La mer Noire et la Romanie génoise (XIII^e^–XV^e^ siècles)*, London, Variorum, 1989, no. V; *idem*, "Gênes dans l'histoire économique de la mer Noire (XIII^e^–XV^e^ siècles)", in *Bulgaria Pontica Medii Aevi*, vol. II, *Deuxième Symposium International, Nessèbre, 26–30 mai 1982*, Sofia, 1988, p. 94.

[7] *Idem*, "The Black Sea in the International Trade of the XIV^th^ and XV^th^ Centuries", in Michael BORGOLTE, Nikolas JASPERT (Hrsg.), *Maritimes Mittelalter. Meere als Kommunikationsräume*, Ostfildern, Thorbecke, 2016, pp. 192–194, republished in *Gênes et la mer*, vol. II, Genova, Società Ligure di Storia Patria, 2017, pp. 730–732.

from Anatolia to the northern Black Sea ports of Caffa, Akkerman and Kilia", given the fact that "the Genoese Caffan merchants brought them [the oriental goods] either from Alexandria or from closer and more convenient Ottoman trade centres such as Bursa, İstanbul and Pera". According to this viewpoint, "Bursa was the chief emporium from which oriental goods flowed along the so-called Moldavian route", that is to say "from the end of the fourteenth century and perhaps even earlier the principal emporium of oriental goods was Bursa"[8]. Whilst it is indisputable that the Black Sea's significance in the international commerce waned dramatically and irreversibly towards the end of the Middle Ages, the theory that the Pontic silk trade was circumscribed during the fifteenth century exclusively to the textiles exported northwards from the Ottoman centres located in the Propontis region fails to consider alternative sources of silk supply and trade routes. Although Bursa held indeed significant prominence as a silk production centre[9], contributing much to the supply of the Ottoman, Mediterranean and Pontic markets, additional research is required to provide a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the commercial transformations that unfolded in the Black Sea region. The primary objective of this brief study is to delve into the probability of ongoing trade relations, albeit on a relatively modest scale, between the Black Sea basin and Central Asia throughout the entire fifteenth century.

Amongst the varieties of silk luxury items, the particular silk cloth that represents our chosen case study came to be known around the Pontic coasts under several names, which were in fact the phonetic and graphic variants of the same word whose oriental origins have not yet been fully clarified (a possible Chinese etymology is mentioned in most dictionaries[10], although some scholars believe that "it was a textile possibly originated in Central Asia"[11]). Depending on the language employed, this sort of silk fabric is found in the late medieval and early modern records as *camocatus* (in Latin), *camocato* (in Italian), *camhă* (in Romanian), *kamcha* (in Polish), *kamka* (in Ukrainian and Russian), *kamuha* (in Bulgarian), καμουχάς (in Greek), and *kemha* (in Ottoman-Turkish), to mention here only one selected variant from the most frequently used languages in this part of the world at the end of the Middle Ages. These different versions of the same word attested throughout the Eastern and South-Eastern Europe seem to demonstrate, if anything, the widespread dissemination of this highly valued commercial product within the mercantile, noble, and princely milieux of the time.

[8] Halil İNALCIK, "The Black Sea and Eastern Europe", in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, vol. I (1300–1600), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 275, 277, 287, 300.

[9] *Cf.* Frédéric HITZEL, "Production et techniques de tissage de la soie à Bursa aux XV^e^ et XVI^e^ siècles", in *Les textiles en Méditerranée (XV^e^–XIX^e^ siècle). Fabrication, commercialisation et consommation*, edited by Gilbert Buti, Jean-Paul Pascual, and Olivier Raveux, special issue, *Rives nord-méditerranéennes*, vol. 29, 2008, pp. 11–24.

[10] For a recent discussion, see Amanda PHILLIPS, *Sea Change. Ottoman Textiles between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2021, pp. 42–43.

[11] Mariachiara GASPARINI, *Transcending Patterns. Silk Road Cultural and Artistic Interactions through Central Asian Textile Images*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2020, p. 174.

One of the main reasons for the popularity enjoyed by this type of cloth in the affluent circles of the more northerly, temperate regions of Europe resides in the fact that *kamka* or *camocatus*, as we shall name it henceforth, was one of the thickest and heaviest silk fabrics produced in this epoch[12]. From a technical standpoint, this heavy silk cloth represented a multiweave fabric, and it was generally made from a compound weave that incorporates two different weave structures[13]. In other words, the *camocatus* silk uses a brocaded technique known as lampas weave[14]. Some of the pieces displayed colourful patterns often embellished with metal-wrapped threads, although the most widespread types of *kamka* were the monochrome ones[15]. Despite their lack of details, the diverse written descriptions that have been preserved provide an overall picture of the most prevalent colours and patterns, and also allow a better grasp of the varying ways in which such fabrics were commonly utilised. As far as the regions surrounding the Black Sea are concerned, the most common colours in which *kamka* was sold seem to have been bright green, light pale green, azure blue, light blue, red, crimson, and white. The patterns could include floral designs, woven stripes, and threads of gold. These silk fabrics were highly appreciated diplomatic gifts, but were also used to endow churches and monasteries, as well as to produce lavish draperies, altar coverings, sumptuous ceremonial garments for both clergy and laity, various pieces of clothing, book covers, and even bed quilts and pillows[16].

The identification of the production centres responsible for manufacturing these silk textiles during the fifteenth century remains a subject of controversy, and no special attempt has been made so as to gain a better understanding of this problem. A closer examination of some fifteenth-century Russian sources and of the recently published Genoese registers of the financial administration of Caffa gives us a more comprehensive image of the commercial circuits through which these goods passed. It is a well-established fact that the late medieval sources of the Muscovite principality overwhelmingly mention Anatolian and Persian silks (coming especially from the Iranian city of Yazd), which were predominantly procured by the Russian merchants in the port of Caffa[17]. It is also known that the Genoese Caffa housed silk weaving

[12] Murat ÇIZAKÇA, "Price History and the Bursa Silk Industry. A Study in Ottoman Industrial Decline, 1550–1650", in *The Ottoman Empire and the World-Economy*, edited by Huri İslamoğu-İnan, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 255–256; Andrei MIREA, "Le commerce pontique au XV^e^ siècle vu à travers les marchandises d'outre-mer véhiculées en Moldavie", *Études balkaniques* (Sofia), 60, 2024, no. 3, pp. 687–739, fn. 134.

[13] Hülya BILGI, *Çatma and Kemha. Ottoman Silk Textiles*, İstanbul, Sadberk Hanım Museum, 2007, pp. 17–21.

[14] James C.Y. WATT, Anne E. WARDWELL, *When Silk was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997, pp. 3, 213.

[15] *Cf.* Zvezdana DODE, "On the Issue of Silk Weaving in Genoese Kaffa and Textiles from the Belorechenskaia Kurgans", *The Silk Road*, vol. 11, 2013, pp. 113–115.

[16] For details, see Andrei MIREA, "Le commerce pontique au XV^e^ siècle", fn. 130–150, and also "Moldavia and Caffa during the Fifteenth Century. New Sources and Interpretations", *Revista Istorică*, vol. 32, nos. 4–6, 2021, pp. 290–295.

[17] Michail P. LESNIKOV, "Les liaisons maritimes et continentales des cités de la côte septentrionale de la mer Noire aux XIII^e^–XV^e^ siècles", in *Navigazioni mediterranee e connessioni continentali (secoli XI–XVI). Atti dell'XI Congresso Internazionale di Storia Marittima (Bari, 28 agosto–9 settembre 1969)*, edited by Rosalba Ragosta, Napoli, Lucio Pironti Editore, 1982, pp. 126–127.

and dyeing workshops, which, however, operated on a relatively modest scale, both in terms of the quantity and quality of their production[18]. The publication in critical editions of several financial registers of the Genoese administration of Caffa (commonly referred to as *Massaria Caffae*)[19] along with some notarial deeds written in the urban centres around the Black Sea basin[20] has afforded scholars an invaluable reservoir of new source materials for investigating the intricacies of the fifteenth-century Pontic silk trade.

The examination of the names of oriental silk fabrics found in the Latin registers of Caffa poses formidable and often insurmountable obstacles to the researcher. The challenges raised by these sources necessitate a collaborative research effort. The broad category of *camocatus* silk encompasses in reality a plethora of subtypes, varieties, and models. Such a diverse spectrum of subcategories might represent cogent pieces of evidence for the existence of diverse geographical sources of silk supply. In the subsequent paragraphs, we shall provide a succinct overview of the most commonly encountered categories of *camocatus*, whilst also trying to identify their respective places of provenance. Even though the precise determination of the silks' regions of origin remains a subject of scholarly contention and has only been possible in certain cases, this analysis compellingly underscores the presence of trade relations between Caffa and Central Asia during the fifteenth century. The most often attested varieties of *camocatus* in the Latin registers of Genoese Caffa include the following:

(1) *camocatus kufteri*. Among the various diplomatic gifts (*exenium*[21]) sent by the Genoese to the Crimean Tartar Khan Hacı I Giray (*Agicarei Imperatori Tartarorum*) in 1442, there is also a type of silk fabric recorded as follows: "for the cost of seventeen pieces of *camocatus kufteri"* (*pro consteo camocatorum cofeteri*

[18] Irina KONOVALOVA, "Some Data about Silk-Weaving in Caffa in the XIVth–XVIth Centuries", in *La seta in Europa sec. XII–XX. Atti della "ventiquattresima Settimana di studi", 4–9 maggio 1992,* edited by Simonetta Cavaciocchi, Firenze, La Monnier, 1993, pp. 335–338; Anastasia TEPLYAKOVA, Mark KRAMAROVSKY, "«Porta Vonitiche vel Filatorum» di Caffa e i tessuti italiani nel XIV–XV secolo nel Caucaso settentrionale", in *Lo Stile dello Zar. Arte e moda tra Italia e Russia dal XIV al XVIII secolo. Prato: Museo del Tessuto, 19 settembre 2009–10 gennaio 2010,* edited by Cristina Acidini, Irina Artemieva, Marco Ciatti, Daniela Degl'Innocenti, Tatiana Lekhovich, and Roberta Orsi Ladini, Milano, Skira, 2009, pp. 23–31.

[19] Alexander DZHANOV, "Каффа и Крым во второй половине XIV в. (преимущественно по данным книг массарии Каффы)", *Sougdaia Collection,* vol. 7, no. 1, 2018, pp. 44–303; *idem,* "Книга Масарії Кафи 1441–1442 рр.", *Ucrainica Mediaevalia,* vol. 4, 2021, pp. 308–375; *idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг (по данным книг массарии Каффы)", *Sougdaia Collection,* vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, pp. 79–373; *idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и соседние государства в 1456–1459 гг. (по данным книг массарии Каффы)", *Sougdaia Collection,* vol. 9, nos. 3–4, 2020, pp. 163–462.

[20] *Notai genovesi in Oltremare. Atti redatti a Caffa ed in altre località del Mar Nero nei secoli XIV e XV,* sotto la direzione di Sergej Pavlovich Karpov, a cura di Maria Grazia Alvaro, Alfonso Assini, Laura Balletto, Enrico Basso, St. Petersburg, Aletheia, 2018.

[21] *Cf.* Sylviane LAZARD, "Les Byzantinismes lexicaux de l'Exarchat de Ravenne et de la Pentapole", *Byzantion,* vol. 56, 1986, p. 398: *exenium, gr.* ξένιον, *"présent d'hospitalité", emprunté par le latin à l'époque impériale avec le sens de "petit cadeau", connut une bonne diffusion dans la langue littéraire jusqu'à l'époque carolingienne, et dans la langue des institutions.*

peciarum XVII)[22]. The gift presented to the captain of the Turkish fleet (*exenium unium facti capitaneo galearum Teucrorum*) by the administration of Caffa, in 1454, comprises *peciis VII camocati coffeteri… alia coffeteri… peciis duabus coffeteri*, and the emissary of the Ottoman Sultan received (*exenium unium factum oratori domini magnifici Teucri*), among other gifts, one *camocatus coffeteri,* and then other *camocatus coffeteri peciis V*[23]. An exhaustive listing of all known instances in which the Genoese made use of this silk cloth as a diplomatic present would be superfluous. However, it is noteworthy to highlight the diverse graphic forms in which the term is found in the available Latin sources. The word *kufteri* is written under the following main forms in the Genoese registers of Caffa: *coferi* (a probable mistake of the scribe), *coffeteri, coffecteri, cofeteri, cofecteri*[24]. This word is likewise attested in East European sources as *kufter* in Russian[25] and as *cofterie* in Romanian[26]. What is the origin of this silk fabric? Two potential explanations can be postulated. On the one hand, there is reason to believe that this particular *camocatus kufteri* silk could have been manufactured in the production centres of the Ottoman Empire, with Bursa being a notable example. There are several arguments that appear to substantiate this identification. The late fifteenth-century Ottoman customs records kept in Caffa provide evidence of commercial transactions involving the *"kaftan* of *kemhā"*[27]. It is significant that whilst the terms *kaftan* and *kufter* generally coexist in the historical sources of Eastern Europe, their introduction to this milieu is generally attributed to the cultural impact exerted by the Ottoman Empire. The 1503 customs register of Brașov (Kronstadt, Brassó) mentions a silk piece of this *kufteri* type brought in Transylvania from the Ottoman Empire under the form *kafftyr*[28]. The fifteenth-century Russian sources explicitly state that "taffetas of Bursa" and *"kamka* of Bursa" were imported from Anatolia to Moscow through the trading centre of Caffa[29]. Several Ottoman documents from the early sixteenth century attest to the manufacturing of *kamka kufteri* of Bursa (*kemhā-i kefterī-i Burusa*) and *kamka kufteri* of Amasya (*Kemhā-i kefterī-i Amasiye*)[30]. On the other hand, it goes without saying that the production of this silk textile cannot be confined exclusively to these Ottoman centres. An old dictionary gives the term *kufter* a Persian etymological

[22] Alexander DZHANOV, "Книга Масарії Кафи 1441–1442 pp.", p. 331.

[23] *Idem*, "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг", pp. 182, 184.

[24] *Ibidem*, pp. 190–191, 251–252, 277, 320, 348–349; *idem*, "Каффа, Крымское ханство и соседние государства в 1456–1459 гг", pp. 243–244, 382, 401, 414, 428–430.

[25] Richard HELLIE, *The Economy and Material Culture of Russia, 1600–1725*, Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p. 306.

[26] *Dicționarul limbii române*, vol. I, partea a II-a (the letter *C*), București, Tipografia Universul, 1940, p. 637, *s.v. cofterie*.

[27] Halil İNALCIK, *Sources and Studies on the Ottoman Black Sea*, vol. I, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 82.

[28] Radu MANOLESCU, "Schimbul de mărfuri dintre Țara Românească și Brașov în prima jumătate a secolului al XVI-lea", *Studii și materiale de istorie medie*, vol. II, 1957, p. 172, fn. 19.

[29] *Cf.* Andrei MIREA, "Le commerce pontique au XV^{e} siècle", fn. 122–123, 156.

[30] Amanda PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p. 108; Sinem Arcak CASALE, *Gifts in the Age of Empire. Ottoman-Safavid cultural exchange, 1500–1639*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2023, pp. 223–228.

origin[31], and more recent research indicates the likelihood that this silk variety could have been also produced in the Persian silk workshops. This hypothesis finds additional support in the documented usage of *kamka kufter* as a diplomatic gift in the context of the political relations between Russia and Central Asia during the seventeenth century[32]. In conclusion, this specific *camocatus kufteri* type of silk cloth can be plausibly linked either to the flow of silk fabrics from the Ottoman Empire to the regions north and west of the Black Sea or to the Persian silk industry that was connected to central Asian and Russian markets.

(2) *camocatus sarancha*. The aforementioned gift presented by the Genoese to the Turkish captain of the Ottoman fleet also includes ten pieces of *camocatus serangi*, and the Sultan's *orator* received as a gift several pieces of *camocatus saranchi*[33]. The diplomatic presents offered by the Genoese of Caffa to the envoy sent by the Polish King Casimir IV (*exenium datum Legato Serenissimi Regis Polonie qui venit ad Agigarei et qui venit videre Caffam*), in 1459, reckoned, among various other items, two pieces of *seranchi* cloth[34]. A Moldavian envoy of Stephen the Great (*legatus Mocastri Stefani vaivode*) who arrived at the Genoese emporium in Crimea, in the winter between 1459 and 1460, is similarly given two pieces of *camocatus seranchi* from the consul of Caffa, Martino Giustiniani[35]. As the instances of such diplomatic gifts could easily be multiplied, we shall proceed by providing an enumeration of the graphic differences documented for this particular silk variety: *saranchi, sarachi, serangi, seranchi*[36]. Concerning the provenance of this type of silk cloth, its nomenclature alludes to two potential explanatory avenues. The first possible explanation is based on the similarity between these words recorded in the Caffa's financial registers and the Ottoman silk textiles called *serenk*[37] or *sīreng*, a "figured luxury compound weave"[38]. The second conceivable explanation is that the silk fabrics referred to by these designations in the Genoese records originate from Central Asia, more precisely from the historical region of Turkestan, where a specific silk cloth known as *sarancha* existed[39]. Three details reinforce the probability

[31] Lazăr ȘĂINEANU, *Influența orientală asupra limbei și culturei române,* vol. II, partea I, București, Socec, 1900, pp. 140–141, *s.v. cofterie.*

[32] Otanazar CHUPONOV, "Названия тканей и украшений в посольских книгах по связям России с Хивой и Бухарой XVII в.", *Foreign Languages in Uzbekistan,* vol. 2, 2020, pp. 44, 46–48, 51–52.

[33] Alexander DZHANOV, "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг", pp. 182, 184.

[34] *Idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и соседние государства в 1456–1459 гг", pp. 413–414.

[35] Andrei MIREA, "Noi informații despre solia lui Ștefan cel Mare în Caffa (decembrie 1459–ianuarie 1460)", paper presented at the *Putna Colloquia XXIX,* August 31, 2023.

[36] Alexander DZHANOV, "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг", pp. 182, 184, 190; *idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и соседние государства в 1456–1459 гг", pp. 219, 414.

[37] Frédéric HITZEL, "Production et techniques de tissage de la soie à Bursa aux XV^e^ et XVI^e^ siècles", fn. 54: *Dans la classification ottomane,* serenk *signifie "trois couleurs". Il désigne une soierie dont le décor, fait à l'aide de trames polychromes, se détache sur un fond uni. Contrairement aux productions les plus luxueuses, le serenk n'utilise pas de fils métalliques d'or et d'argent*.

[38] Amanda PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, pp. 46, 70, 105, 230, 337.

[39] N.I. VOROBEV, *Материальная культура казанских татар,* Kazan, Dom Tatarskoj kul'tury i Akademičeskij centr T.N.K.P., 1930, pp. 307–308; Allen J. FRANK, *Bukhara and the Muslims of Russia,* Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2012, p. 69.

of the second Asian identification without completely excluding the Ottoman one. Firstly, in the Genoese sources, the *camocatus sarancha* variety is frequently found in conjunction with two other types of silk fabrics which we shall briefly discuss below, and which remain entirely unknown to the Ottoman world. Secondly, the late fifteenth-century Ottoman customs registers of Caffa do not mention the importation of *serenk* cloth from the main Ottoman territories to the Crimean Peninsula[40]. Thirdly, a recent study on the seventeenth-century diplomatic relations between Russia and the khanates of Central Asia mentions a kind of diplomatic gift called *sarjaniška* (*сарянишка*)[41], which may fairly well be related to the silk fabrics recorded in the fifteenth-century registers of Caffa. At present, we lack any additional argument to establish more firmly the origins of this silk cloth.

(3) *camocatus besbades.* In the early 1440s, several gifts were presented to the Tartar Khan, and among these offerings featured a distinct and highly valued silk, named *camocatus besdobes*[42]. A few years later, in 1456, the Khan of the Tartars received a few more pieces of *bestabex* cloth[43]. In September 1463, another emissary sent by Stephen the Great of Moldavia is attested in Caffa (*Barcacho, ambasiatori Stephani Vaivode*), where he likewise received a piece of *camocatus bestabes* from the administration of the Genoese city[44]. The form of this word as well as the multiple variants in which it is written convincingly prove that the functionaries of Caffa's financial office were trying to write down a foreign and unfamiliar word that was difficult to reproduce accurately: *bestabes, besdobes, bestabes, bestabex, betsabex, besdabes*[45]. Transcribing one of the entries from Caffa's registers for the year 1423, the Russian historian S.P. Karpov translated the term *besbades* as *камка зеленая*, *i.e.* "green *kamka*"[46]. Nevertheless, the sole explanation currently substantiated by the available sources is the correlation drawn between these various forms recorded in the Genoese registers and a certain silk fabric called *bekasab*, which represents a central Asian striped cloth[47].

(4) *camocatus sepai.* The administration of Caffa paid in 1442 "for the costs of sixteen pieces of *camocatus sepai"* (*pro consteo camocatorum sepai peciarum XVI*)[48]. The list of expenses incurred for the accommodation of two envoys sent to Caffa by

[40] Halil İNALCIK, *Sources and Studies on the Ottoman Black Sea,* I, pp. 53–77.

[41] Otanazar CHUPONOV, "Названия тканей и украшений", pp. 51–52.

[42] Alexander DZHANOV, "Книга Масарії Кафи 1441–1442 рр.", p. 331.

[43] *Idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг", pp. 348–349.

[44] Nicolae IORGA, *Acte și fragmente cu privire la istoria românilor adunate din depozitele de manuscrise ale Apusului,* vol. III, Bucureşti, Imprimeria Statului, 1897, pp. 40–41; *idem, Opere economice,* ed. Georgeta Penelea, București, Editura Științifică și Pedagogică, 1982, p. 505.

[45] Alexander DZHANOV, "Книга Масарії Кафи 1441–1442 рр.", p. 331; *idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг", pp. 277, 348–349; *idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и соседние государства в 1456–1459 гг", pp. 243–244, 391, 419, 428.

[46] Sergej Pavlovich KARPOV, *Итальянские морские республики и Южное Причерноморье в XIII–XV вв.: Проблемы торговли,* Moskva, Izd-vo M.G.U., 1990, p. 121.

[47] N.I. VOROBEV, *op. cit.*, pp. 307–308; Janet HARVEY, *Traditional Textiles of Central Asia,* New York, Thames and Hudson, 1997, pp. 93, 111, 153; Susan MELLER, *Silk and Cotton. Textiles from the Central Asia that Was,* New York, Abrams, 2013, *passim.*

[48] Alexander DZHANOV, "Книга Масарії Кафи 1441–1442 рр.", p. 331.

the Tartar Khan (*expense facte pro duobus nunciis Imperatoris Tartarorum qui Caffam venerunt*), in the mid-1450s, also included the purchase of a certain piece of silk called *sepay*. Considered among the offerings presented to an emissary from the court of the Ottoman Sultan (*exenium unum missum domino regi Teucrorum*) is a specimen of this particular *camocatus sepai* variety. Later on, two more pieces of *camocatus sepai* will be bought in Caffa for "the offering given and presented by the honourable lord consul [of Caffa], the respected lords treasurers and the procurators to the Akhmat the Turk, the ambassador of the Turkish Sultan" (*exenium datum et presentatum per magnificum dominum consulem, spectabiles dominos massarios et provissores etc. Acmac Teucro ambasiatory regis Teucrorum*)[49]. Both Moldavian envoys, one arriving in Caffa in the winter of 1459–1460 and the other in September 1463, were recipients of a diplomatic gift comprising also a piece of silk called *sepai* or even *supai*[50]. The graphic forms of this word are more diverse than what first meets the eye: *sepai, sepay, cepai* (this variant is repeated several times) or *supai*[51]. Based on the specific name of this silk, the grand Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga posited the hypothesis that it could represent a distinct "Tartar silk variety"[52]. The names of silk fabrics recorded in the Genoese registers of Caffa invite us to re-examine more attentively the broad category of Tartar cloths (*panni Tartarici*)[53]. Given the absence of any references to such a silk type in the Ottoman sources, the possibility of a central Asian source for its procurement appears plausible. Since we have been unable to identify a reasonable explanation for this term, we look forward to potential solutions proposed by future research endeavours.

In addition to these four types of *camocatus* that we have briefly discussed (*coffecteri, saranchi, besbades* and *sepai*), the Genoese sources of Caffa also mention more rarely other varieties, such as *camocatus cogori* and *camocatus giangari*[54], which, to our mind at least, cannot be linked to any known silk types from Eastern Europe or from the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, it becomes imperative to embark on a research endeavour focused towards the regions of Central Asia. In this regard, other names of fabrics documented in the registers of Caffa serve as possible evidence of the commercial ties linking the central Asian countries with the Black Sea region during the fifteenth century. For example, the Genoese administration of the Crimean emporium engaged on numerous occasions in the procurement of a specific fabric known as *zentonus, zentunus* or *zentunum* (the Latin attested forms

[49] *Idem*, "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг", pp. 184, 190, 251–252.

[50] Andrei MIREA, "Noi informații despre solia lui Ștefan cel Mare în Caffa"; Nicolae IORGA, *Acte și fragmente*, III, pp. 40–41.

[51] See also Alexander DZHANOV, "Каффа, Крымское ханство и соседние государства в 1456–1459 гг", pp. 243–244, 382, 391, 392, 414, 428, 430.

[52] Nicolae IORGA, *Acte și fragmente*, III, pp. 40–41; *idem, Opere economice*, p. 505.

[53] *Cf.* Anne E. WARDWELL, *"Panni Tartarici*. Eastern Islamic Silks Woven with Gold and Silk (13th and 14th Centuries)", *Islamic Art*, vol. III, 1988, pp. 95–173; Maria Ludovica ROSATI, *"Panni tartarici*: Fortune, Use, and the Cultural Reception of Oriental Silks in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth-century European Mindset", in *Seri-Technics: Historical Silk Technologies*, edited by Dagmar Schäfer, Giorgio Riello, and Luca Molà, Berlin, Max-Planck-Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaften, 2020, pp. 73–88; Patricia BLESSING, Elizabeth DOSPĚL WILLIAMS, Eiren L. SHEA, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–35.

[54] Alexander DZHANOV, "Каффа, Крымское ханство и османы в 1454–1456 гг", pp. 244, 257.

are *zentonim, zentuni, zentuny* or even *zentonnii,* and the types include *zentonus cremexus, i.e.* "crimson", *viridus, scura, i.e.* "brown", and *nigrus*)[55]. In Central Asia, the term *zenden* (*зенденъ*) designated a plain cotton or silk cloth dyed in different colours[56]. Given the current state of knowledge, it is difficult to establish whether the *zentonus* fabric mentioned in Caffa's records originates from Central Asia or it is simply a variant of the term *zetani,* the Italian equivalent for satin[57].

Returning now to the *camocatus* type of silk fabrics, the French historian Jacques Heers observed that

> *au XV^e^ siècle, le grand trafic d'Asie ne passe plus par les rives de la mer Noire ; ce n'est pas lui qui justifie les efforts des Génois et des Vénitiens à Tana pour relever leurs ruines et maintenir leur domination. Un certain commerce se fait peut-être encore par l'intérieur, à travers les principautés tartares; en 1452, arrivent à Péra des "camocati" chargés à Caffa; ce sont des draps de soie de Chine ou de Perse et cette simple indication témoigne tout de même de quelque activité des anciennes caravanes*[58].

Although the reference to China seems rather unsuitable in the given context, this intriguing observation derived from a meticulous scrutiny of Genoese documents can be further corroborated with some fifteenth-century Ottoman documents thoughtfully edited by Nicoară Beldiceanu. Three Ottoman customs regulations, promulgated during the reign of Sultan Mehmed II, make explicit mention of the trade in *"kemha* of Caffa" conducted inside the Ottoman Empire[59]. This might indicate silk fabrics from Central Asia that were passing through Caffa before crossing the Black Sea on their way to Constantinople.

Some recently published Genoese notarial deeds attest to the commercial links that the merchants operating in Caffa maintained in 1411 with the Iranian province of Gilan (*provincie de lo Ghilam*), located near the coasts of the Caspian Sea, which was well known for its silk production since the time of Marco Polo. One of these documents, drawn up in Caffa on July 20, 1411 by the notary Giovanni de Labayno (*Iohannes de Labayno*), deals with a load of silk cloths (*fardellus syrici*) stolen on the road from Gilan to Crimea. This trade was primarily conducted by Persian, Armenian and Greek merchants. The participation of merchants coming from the Iranian provinces of Gilan (*Ghilam*), Mazandaran (*Mazandram*), and Zanjan (the Latin deed mentions the city of Soltaniyeh as *Soltania*) in the judicial proceedings conducted in Caffa provides substantial grounds to establish one of Caffa's oriental

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[55] *Ibidem,* pp. 120, 128, 157, 173, 186–187, 191, 193, 277, 348–349; *idem,* "Каффа, Крымское ханство и соседние государства в 1456–1459 гг", pp. 212, 218, 220, 365, 385, 400, 428, 430.

[56] Otanazar CHUPONOV, "Названия тканей и украшений", pp. 44, 49–51.

[57] *Cf.* Amanda PHILLIPS, *op. cit.,* pp. 44, 46.

[58] Jacques HEERS, *Gênes au XV^e^ siècle. Civilisation méditerranéenne, grand capitalisme, et capitalisme populaire,* Paris, Flammarion, 1971, p. 262.

[59] Nicoară BELDICEANU, *Les actes des premiers sultans conservés dans les manuscrits turcs de la Bibliothèque nationale à Paris,* vol. I, *Actes de Mehmed II et de Bayezid II du Ms. fonds Turc Ancien 39,* Paris/La Haye, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1960, doc. 36, p. 114; doc. 37, p. 117; doc. 54, p. 147.

sources of silk supply[60]. Furthermore, Amedeo Vigna has published several documents that show the Genoese administration of Caffa allocating funds for the functioning of a "bureau for silk weighing" (*officium ponderis sete*) during the 1450s and 1460s[61]. It would be hard to believe that the heavily indebted and financially struggling administration of Caffa would periodically assign resources to the maintenance of this office for the sole purpose of weighing silk textiles imported from Bursa and Constantinople. A more plausible explanation is that this state-funded bureau functioned because both raw and processed silks reached Caffa from multiple sources of supply, because silk commerce assumed a political dimension, and because silk weavers and silk dye workshops existed in the Crimean city.

Finally, the fact that several types of *kamka* repeatedly appear in the registers of Genoese Caffa under various very rare and ambiguous oriental names originating most likely from Central Asia persuasively suggests that the trade links established between the historical region of Turkestan and the Black Sea basin during the fifteenth century must be reconsidered in future research. By the same token, Persia supplied the Ottoman markets not only with raw silk, but also with finished silk products, and some of these silks were afterwards reexported to the northern regions of the Pontic basin. Additionally, as highlighted earlier, commercial ties were directly established between the northern Persian provinces and Caffa without the intermediation of the Ottoman Empire. In conclusion, the principal sources of silk supply for the fifteenth-century Black Sea region appear to have been the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and Central Asia. The late medieval documents we have covered already indicate that the silk commerce in the Black Sea during the fifteenth century was indeed much richer and more diverse than previously believed.

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[60] *Notai genovesi in Oltremare*, pp. 17, 363, 424–438.

[61] Amedeo VIGNA, *Codice diplomatico delle colonie tauro-liguri durante la signoria dell'Ufficio di S. Giorgio*, vol. I, Genova, Tipografia del R.I. de Sordo-Muti, 1868, doc. L, p. 138; see also *idem*, *Codice diplomatico delle colonie tauro-liguri durante la signoria dell'Ufficio di S. Giorgio*, vol. II, parte II, Genova, Tipografia del R.I. de Sordo-Muti, 1879, pp. 881–882.

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