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Charles King, The Black Sea: A History

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Critical Perspectives

Approches Critiques

Charles King,
THE BLACK SEA: A HISTORY
Oxford University Press, 2004, 276 pages + 15 plates.

It is always a pleasure to review a book that acknowledges the help of the same librarians from whose gentle scholarship one has also benefited (in my case, at the European Reading Room of the Library of Congress, the Hoover Institution archives at Stanford and, of course, the Library of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest). Charles King was already the author of an important contribution, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia and the Politics of Culture* (2000), and has now produced an informative and entertaining book on the Black Sea. It was a daring endeavour, as the previous authoritative work on the topic was Bratianu's 1969 *La Mer Noire. Des origines à la conquête ottomane*. King deplores that this great work was truncated by Bratianu's death before writing the second volume. The truth, however, is that the book did have a second half, since it grew from the Romanian historian's last course in 1945-1946. For obscure reasons, this second volume has never been published. Anyway, it is probably unfair to compare the two works, each of them answering questions specific to such different generations (Bratianu was born in 1898 while King, I suppose, must be now in his early forties). For instance, the pages on deepwater archaeology of the Black Sea or the chapters on ecology, including the environmental changes provoked by the devastating invasion of a species of jelly-fish, could not have been written before the 1980s and they make for very interesting reading. The political developments of the latest years were equally hard to imagine, originating in the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to the appearance of new states on the northern and eastern coasts of the Black Sea. The author is right in observing the reemergence after 1990 of old ties connecting the ordinary lives across Black Sea shores. He is perhaps wrong when he considers so optimistically the future of the efforts to build up around the Pontic waters a secure and cooperative region. Summits like the one in Bucharest in 2006 showed the mutual suspicion that still lurks behind wishful thinking.

Some readers might find somewhat sketchy the Greek and Roman ancient history of the sea. Legends place the tomb of Achilles not at the mouth of the

Dnepr, but on Insula Șerpilor, the Island of the Snakes, in front of the Danube delta. Iphigeneia was Agamemnon's daughter and a victim of her father, not the "blood-thirsty priestess" of the savage Tauri. The list of the most important Milesian colonies around the Black Sea (p. 29) is not complete without Histria (Istros) and Tomis. According to Pliny the Elder, the number of *poleis* founded by settlers from Miletus amounted to 90. The author records the Thracian horseman as a mere image of the barbarian garb: archaeologists and art historians agree on its divine status, apparently as an intercessor of souls.

The next chapter is treated more attentively, encompassing a whole millennium till the turn of the sixteenth century. The descriptions by travellers such as Marco Polo, William of Rubrouck, Pero Tafur or Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo provide vivid and substantial information on the Golden Horde's dominance over the steppes, on the Genoese colonies in the Levant and on the Empire of Trebizond. Charles King refrains from any attempt to achieve more than a fragmented mosaic out of the great story of Levantine trade. It is certainly the time to try a new approach to a topic which, since the days of the great Heyd, was fruitfully dealt with by R. S. Lopez, G. I. Bratianu, Ș. Papacostea, A. M. Bryer and S. P. Karpov (though the first and the last of them are never mentioned). Sometimes, the author's attention is attracted by minor and picturesque figures, like the fifteenth century adventurer, Ludovico da Bologna, who claimed to have been sent by the eastern Christians to request troops for a crusade against the Ottomans. The bibliography of this episode could be enriched by adding the article "Nuovi documenti su fr. Lodovico da Bologna, al secolo Lodovico Severi, Nunzio Apostolico in Oriente (1455-1477)", *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 69, (1976), pp. 3-22. See also the book by Lajos Tardy, *Beyond the Ottoman Empire: 14th-16th Century Hungarian Diplomacy in the East*, Szeged, 1978.

The situation of the Pontic navigation changed with the conquest of the last Christian strongholds around the Black Sea: Cetatea Albă on the Dnestr and Chilia on the northern arm of the Danube. The loss for Moldavia of these two fortresses (1484) was aggravated in 1538, when the stripe of coast between the Dnestr and the Prut fell into the hands of the Ottomans. However, the author is right to express doubts about the popular term concerning a "Turkish lake": the penetration of foreign ships in these waters was never totally prevented. Recent archaeological excavations at Vadu-Caraharman, in Romanian Dobrudja, seem to prove the presence of some Venetian merchants in that region after the end of the fifteenth century. King correctly concludes that the

local rulers of Crimea and Moldavia “saw in the Ottomans a useful counterweight to the dominance of the Italians and, moreover, a helpful ally against northern powers such as Poland, Hungary and Muscovy” (p. 114). The figures quoted about Caffa’s population and trade are telling on the shifts in the ethnic composition and the resumption of an undiminished commercial activity. King highlights correctly the real core of the relationship between the princes of Wallachia or Moldavia and their overlord, the sultan: with the exception of several adventurous characters, whose incentive to revolt was usually to be found in their personal career, these rulers thought, like Constantine Brancoveanu, that the regime could be tolerable if the Ottoman Empire were governed by wise statesmen. Another point on which the author’s perspective is just and clear: the absence of a naval force in Moldavia, Crimea or Georgia. These states “had grown up in the plains and mountains of the hinterlands with little affinity for the sea”. The same thing may be said about the Turks: the Ottoman navy had Greek crews. A lot of interesting details concern the form and technological design of the Black Sea ships, most of such information being taken from the Mesembria drawings studied by N. Ovcharov. The Cossack raiders who, during the first half of the seventeenth century, used to loot the Bulgarian coastline (for instance, the pillage of Varna in 1606) had light boats, while the Ottoman warships were still of the galley type. According to a document I found in the Florence archives, such attacks, which threatened even Istanbul, spared the Slavic-speaking population, but massacred the Greeks along with the Turks.

As it was to be expected, original research, based on various primary sources, is more impressive in the chapters on modern history. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were dominated by the Russian drive to control the Black Sea. The 1771 exodus of the Kalmyks, a pastoral group of tribes of Mongol origin who left the Don-Volga region, fleeing from the Russian settlers and functionaries, and sought refuge across the border with China, makes a good story and it is well told. A pioneer of Franco-Russian commercial relations, Baron Anthoine was a first-rate witness of Russian economic expansion after the annexation of Crimea: the result of that episode was a description of the region illustrated with admirable maps. The French geographer who collaborated with the baron’s book, Barbié du Bocage, was also a correspondent of Demetrius Daniel Philippides (their letters, edited by A. Cioranescu and Aikaterini Koumariou, attest the ample unfolding of the Enlightenment in Moldavia). On the Prince of Nassau-Siegen, the rival of Paul Jones when the latter commanded a part of the Russian fleet, there is an old biography by the

Marquis d'Aragon, which would have provided supplementary details. The beginnings of Odessa and the opening of a steamline from Trabzon to Southampton are appropriately given the same consideration as the Crimean War.

The turmoil of the following period, till the present day, receives a colourful account; the author is always careful with the distribution of epithets or verdicts, neutral, but equitable. Of all the strange episodes disinterred here, the most striking is the Promethean project. *Prométhée* was a journal published in Paris before World War II by the émigré circles from Ukraine and the Caucasus who planned to create an anti-Bolshevik alliance of Black Sea states, calling on the support of Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and even Poland, for the idea of a political and economic community. It is a goal which is nowadays revived and pursued.

Therefore, this book comes at its hour. Readers of the outer world will find here much to learn; for the scholars of the region, there is enough to gather and to inspire further, more punctual, investigations. For this reason, more than for the tasty anecdotage, Charles King's work is to be welcomed.

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