Chapter 18

Colonies and Colonization

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The word “colony” is a charged one. It can conjure an exotic locus of otherness and distance, a zone of exploitation offering easy riches but also filled with risk, a place of adventure, opportunity, and personal transformation, as well as the context for interethnic contacts (and conflicts), unconventional experiences, and extraordinary choices. At the same time, individuals who migrate to colonies retain emotional ties to their homeland, which not only allow new settlers to recognize their compatriots in sometimes hostile circumstances, but also serve as a constant reminder to remain true to their origins. In medieval colonies, the collectivity acted according to moral and institutional responsibilities that bound distant parts of the same body. This age-old phenomenon was an expression of different needs—migratory, military, economic—and was exemplified by the ties between center and colony. Although the strength of these bonds varied depending on underlying institutional, socio-demographic, and mercantile elements, their existence was inevitable. Aulus Gellius, the second-century Roman author of the *Attic Nights*, considered Rome’s colonies to be direct extensions of the Roman people, of which they “seem to be miniatures, as it were, and in a way copies.”¹ Medieval colonies were certainly different from the colonies of Roman times—yet from political, legal, and institutional standpoints, even in the Middle Ages colonies tended to mirror their homeland. Reflecting upon the words of Aulus Gellius, the scholarly admirer of medieval urban civilization Carlo Cattaneo characterized this custom of duplicating settlements as typical of the Italic peoples since ancient times, as they tended to “spread from a city to the other, replicating the ways of life of their motherland.”² Similarly, the verses of the medieval poet known as the Anonymous Genoese exalt the diaspora of his fellow citizens and their creation of replicas of their Genoese homeland wherever they went.³

If, however, we consider the many medieval Genoese settlements and their characteristics, the situation is neither linear nor homogenous, since the term “colony” has been applied to a plethora of different places and contexts

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² Cattaneo, *Città*, 52–3.
³ Anonimo genovese, *Poesie*, 566.
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In William Heyd’s *Histoire du commerce du Levant au Moyen Âge* (1885–6), the word “colony” denotes two different models, one related to commercial outposts, such as in the Crusader states and at Alexandria, and the other related to settlements typified by long-term residence, such as in the northern Pontic area.⁴

In referring to the Italian presence in Constantinople and the Greek territories, the same author distinguished between colonies, quarters, and consulates, but most of the time he exploited the versatility of the term “colony,” using it generically. Adolf Schaubé would later use the term similarly in his 1906 study of the commercial activities of the Latin (i.e. western European) people.⁵ Schaubé was nonetheless aware that the major frame of reference for the Genoese colonial empire is the Black Sea, where a coordinated system of settlements developed. Ligurian scholars of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—namely Carlo Pagano, Ludovico Sauli, Michele Giuseppe Canale, Cornelio Desimoni, Luigi Tommaso Belgrano, Amedeo Vigna, Camillo Manfroni, and Gerolamo Bertolotto—were also interested in the history of Italian expansion. Their work concentrated mainly on the settlement of Pera-Galata in Byzantine territory (see figs. 82–3), granted by the Byzantine *basileus* and inhabited by westerners subject to the laws of their homeland, and the settlement of Caffa, the Genoese outpost in the Crimea (now Feodosia; figs. 79–80). Aware of the importance of the Black Sea in Genoese history, G.I. Bratianu, the author of *La Mer Noire: Des origines à la conquête ottomane* (1969), highlighted the importance of westerners’ colonies for the Golden Horde. As Bratianu emphasized, thanks to these new opportunities the medieval economy took on global proportions: in fact, the contacts between Mongols and Italians contributed to the development of the first commercial and banking phase of European capitalism. Further, Guido Astuti’s observations on the Genoese colony of Caffa showed the importance of the presence of a consul from 1281 and the end of hostilities with Uzbeg Khan in 1313, since it was only then that the colonial role of the *civitas* could be fully expressed.⁶ Despite this focus on Genoa and the Black Sea, already in 1938 R.S. Lopez was considering all the Genoese colonial settlements in the Mediterranean.⁷ This approach enabled him to underscore the individualistic character of initiatives that originated in Genoa, whether undertaken autonomously or at the service of the homeland. The subsequent flourishing of studies based on Lopez’s work—often those

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⁴ Heyd, *Histoire*.
⁵ Schaubé, *Handelsgeschichte*.
⁶ Astuti, “Colonie genovesi.”
⁷ Lopez, *Storia delle colonie* and *Su e giù*. 