

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

The Battle of Ankara

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From India, Timur turned towards Baghdad. The year was 1400. Facing him were an array of foes extending in an arc from Iraq through Syria, Turkey and into the Caucasus. He was cognizant of the strength of the Ottoman Turks and initially wished to avoid a confrontation with them. But the westward march of the Tatars was bound to run up against the equally expansive Ottomans. The cause for hostilities was provided by the flight of some of Timur's foes into Ottoman territories where they received the traditional Turkish protection. Timur wrote to the Ottoman Sultan Bayazid asking that the fugitives be expatriated. The response was not only negative; it was insulting. Further correspondence followed, more insults traded, until it was clear that a test of strength between the two giants was inevitable.

Timur could have taken Baghdad as he went, but he always planned his moves with the meticulous care of a great conqueror. First, he focused on clearing his flanks. Moving up to the headwaters of the Tigris and the Euphrates (in modern Turkey) he captured the key city of Sivas. The defending Turkish contingent fled. From there Timur sent detachments towards Georgia and the Caucasus Mountains, eliminating the Georgian and Armenian Crusaders who had menaced his rearguard. Then he turned west and advanced towards Syria. His objective was to neutralize the Mamlukes before undertaking a test of strength with the Ottomans so that his flank would not be threatened from Cairo. Mamluke armies were camped in Aleppo, a heavily defended walled city with high ramparts. The Tatars lured the Mamlukes from their fortified positions. A great battle ensued in which the Mamlukes were soundly trounced and were sent reeling south towards the Sinai. Timur took Aleppo and moved on Damascus. In 1401, Damascus surrendered and the Mamlukes sued for peace. The terms of surrender were negotiated for the Mamlukes by no less a person than the great historian Ibn Khaldun, author of the *Muqaddamah*. Ibn Khaldun was at the time serving the Mamluke sultans of Cairo. Damascus met the same fate as had earlier befallen Isfahan, Delhi and a host of other cities. The city was sacked, set on fire and was almost obliterated. Timur captured the artisans and architects of the city and sent them to Samarqand to work on his many projects. It is said that it was in Damascus that Timur saw a pomegranate shaped dome that adorned one of the mosques. This dome, further refined, was erected on many a tomb in Samarqand. Two hundred years later through Timur's descendants, the Great Moghuls in India, this same concept found its sublime expression in the dome of the Taj Mahal.

With his flanks cleared, Timur retraced his steps to Baghdad. The Ottomans were still busy in Europe. In 1386, the powerful Sultan Bayazid of the Ottomans had defeated the Serbs at the Battle of Kosova and had forged ahead into Bulgaria (1392) and lands beyond the Danube. Therefore, Timur had the luxury of

laying siege to the city with carefully deliberation. Sultan Ahmed of Baghdad fled and left the city in charge of a lieutenant, Nuruddin who valiantly defended the city. Baghdad, despite the ravages of the Mongols, was still a city to be reckoned with militarily. It was defended on one side by the waters of the Tigris River and on the others by high walls manned by long-range batteries. But Nuruddin could not withstand the onslaught of the Tatars and the city fell. General slaughter followed in the fashion of Timurid conquests. Chroniclers report that twenty-one towers of skulls were erected in the city. The buildings, save the mosques and Sufi *zawiyahs*, were pulled down. This was the final *coupe de grace* for Baghdad, a city that was once the crown jewel of the world. After Timur, Baghdad was to remain a provincial town at best, with the glory of the past inscribed only in the stones that lay scattered around the once mighty monuments.

Timur had subdued the Georgians, forced the Mamlukes to pay him tribute, conquered the great city of Baghdad and was now ready to face the Ottomans. In the ensuing struggle between the two great conquerors, Timur of the Tatars and Bayazid of the Ottomans, one sees a contrast between careful planning on one side and casual overconfidence on the other. Timur made every move with meticulous care, gathering intelligence about the movements of his foe, while carefully concealing his own. Reinforcements were brought in both from Samarqand and Afghanistan. Bayazid, on the other hand, appeared so confident that his usual prudence deserted him. He moved leisurely from the plains of Hungary through the Balkans, crossed the Bosphorus and moved to his camp at Ankara. From there, he advanced towards Sivas with an army of over 100,000, expecting to confront the enemy. But Timur was a consummate soldier. He knew that the Ottoman strength was in its infantry, which was well disciplined, well-armed and the most formidable in the world. Eluding the Turks advancing towards him, Timur swung behind the Ottoman armies towards Ankara. Bayazid was well over a hundred miles from Ankara when he heard that the Tatars were headed for his home base. He was forced to turn around to protect his base. But it was too late. Timur had already occupied Ankara and the Ottoman camps. Furthermore, the Tatars diverted the waters of the Ankara River and poisoned the only other supply of water in the area, a fresh water fountain. By the time the Turks arrived at Ankara, they had marched a long distance and were tired, hungry and thirsty. The Turkish Sultan had been checkmated. Denied access to water, Bayazid had to order an assault against the powerful and mobile Tatar cavalry. The battle was lost before it started. The Ottoman infantry, which was until that time invincible in defensive warfare, was no match for the swift cavalry of Timur. Within hours of the start of battle, over 50,000 Turks lay dead on the battlefield. Bayazid fought bravely, but was captured and was brought back to Timur in a cage. There, in the tent of the mighty Tatar conqueror, he had to bear the humiliating indignity of watching his household brought in naked. The heartbroken Bayazid died in captivity three months later. Thus was the end of one of the bravest soldiers among the Turks and undoubtedly one of its most renowned conquerors. Timur advanced to Constantinople, but did not cross the Straits into Europe. The Ottoman Empire, which was almost annihilated, survived under Sulaiman, the resilient son of Bayazid and went on to become the most powerful empire in the world during the following centuries.

The Battle of Ankara in 1402 provides a benchmark in Islamic history. It was the last of the great battles fought by Timur. He had brought an end to the Tughlaq dynasty in India, destroyed the Golden Horde and set the Russians free, displaced the Muzaffars in Persia, eliminated the Fatimid assassins, razed Baghdad to the ground, humbled the Mamlukes of Egypt and had nearly extinguished the Ottoman Empire. He had destroyed the old-world order and a new order was in the making. But the great conqueror was not yet satisfied. His ambition was to conquer the world. Returning to Samarqand, he made preparations for a march on China. Within three months he was on the move again, at the head of 300,000 soldiers, towards Beijing. But death claimed this mighty conqueror at the age of 69, in 1405 and China was spared the ravages suffered by the rest of the known civilized world.

Timur had welded an empire by the force of his will, uniting the warring Tatars into the most feared fighting machine in the world since the days of Genghiz Khan. With his death, this imposed unity fell apart and the far-flung provinces of the Timurid Empire asserted their independence one by one, except its core in Central Asia and Persia, which was inherited by the enlightened Shah Rukh, son of Timur.

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