

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Timur of Samarqand

Timur of Samarqand, Conqueror of 5 Empires

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By the year 1395, the Byzantine capital of Constantinople was surrounded on all sides by Ottoman territories. The inexorable advance of the Turks had made them masters of southeastern Europe and Anatolia. Ottoman cavalry had crossed the River Danube and marched onto the plains of Hungary. Desperate to save his throne, the Greek Emperor Manuel appealed to Pope Boniface IX and the sovereigns of Europe for help. In 1396, the counts and barons of Europe answered the call. Taking time off from their civil strife and the Hundred Years War, the soldiers of the Cross from France, Germany, England, Holland and Hungary met the Turks at the Battle of Nicopolis. The Crusaders suffered a crushing defeat and victory belonged to Ottoman Sultan Bayazid. After Nicopolis, Europe had no stomach to fight and became more interested in trade with the fledgling Ottoman Empire. Bayazid proceeded to lay siege to the Byzantine capital. Dejected, Emperor Manuel was preparing to surrender Constantinople to Sultan Bayazid when help arrived from an unexpected quarter, namely, Timur of Samarqand.

Throughout the 13th and 14th centuries, the Pope and the monarchs of Europe made a concerted effort to woo the Mongols. The fate of Asia, indeed of the Old World, hung in the balance, as the Mongol princes toyed with their preference first for Christianity, then for Islam and yet at other times for Buddhism. After the death of Genghiz Khan, his vast empire was divided into four major regions. One was the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty of China ruled by the Ka-Khans (meaning, the Great Khans). Kublai Khan (1268-1294), grandson of Genghiz, was the greatest ruler of that dynasty. The second was the Chagtai Empire (named for the son of Genghiz), centered in Samarqand and including the vast steppes of Central Asia as well as the fertile valley of Farghana and extending south to Afghanistan. The third was Persia, ruled by the Il-Khans (meaning, deputies of the Great Khan). The fourth was the vast region between Hungary and the Caspian Sea, including much of what is today Russia, which was ruled by the Tatars (called the Golden Horde because Batu, the son of Jochi and grandson of Genghiz Khan had an emblem of gold on his tent).

By the year 1300, Islam had won the battle of the heart over Christianity and Buddhism and the Il-Khans of Persia, the Chagtai of Central Asia and the Tatars of the Volga had all accepted Islam. Only Mongolia and China remained outside the fold of Islam and the Ka-Khans were submerged among the Chinese. In Russia and Central Asia, the Mongols exercised their authority through their governors and satraps. By common agreement, these satraps were Tatars, a Turkoman people related to but otherwise separate and

distinct from the Mongols. The Tatars had been conquered by Genghiz Khan but had later joined the Mongol armies in their invasions of Khorasan, Russia and Persia. A truce existed between the Mongols and the Tatars whereby sovereignty would belong to the Mongols while the Tatars would serve them as their administrators and regents.

In the first half of the 14th century, by the year 1350, all four of the Mongol regions experienced civil wars and a breakup of central authority. The Il-Khanid Empire in Persia fell apart after the death of Prince Abu Sayeed. In the latter half of the 14th century, Persia was ruled by a host of princes, called the Muzaffars. Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz, Herat each had its own sovereign. These petty princes waged war against each other and continuously raised taxes on the peasantry to pay for their internal fights. The peasantry suffered. Similarly, the Chagtai region, which extended from Afghanistan to Mongolia, was contested between various warlords. The Tatars of the Volga, a loose collection of Mongol tribes, was united only when they raided the Russian hinterlands for booty. Indeed, the Tatars burned down Moscow in 1382. Out of this period of instability rose Timur, commonly known as Timurlane, who was perhaps the greatest conqueror the world has ever known.

Timur is studied in regional histories as the conqueror who defeated the Ottomans at the Battle of Ankara (1402) or the man who slaughtered over 100,000 persons in Delhi (1399). Such a narrow approach does injustice to this great conqueror. The extent of Timur's conquests must be measured in the context of observations made by writers of the era. Ibn Batuta, writing in 1360, said that there were seven great emperors in the world: (1) The Merinide Sultan of Morocco (2) The Mamluke Sultan of Egypt (3) The Ottoman Sultan of Turkey (4) The Il-Khan of Persia (5) The Khan of the Chagtai Empire in Central Asia (6) The Tughlaq Emperor of India and (7) The Ming Emperor of China. One may disregard the Sultan of Morocco whose name Ibn Batuta had to include to be politically correct to his own sovereign. Timur conquered five of the other six emperors. From Delhi to Moscow, from Amu Darya to the Sinai desert of Egypt, the flag of Timur fluttered unchallenged. He conquered Russia and destroyed the power of the Tatars of the Volga (1385-1389). He captured and burned Isfahan (1398) and Delhi (1399) and brought an end to the Tughlaq dynasty of India. He took and burned Damascus (1401) and forced the Mamlukes of Egypt to pay him tribute. He defeated the Ottomans, captured Bayazid at the Battle of Ankara (1402) and almost obliterated the Ottoman Empire in its infancy. Only China escaped the wrath of his sword because Timur died on his way to conquering that ancient land (1405). Timur's Empire extended over seven million square miles, an area more than double that of the United States. The rise of modern Russia may be dated from the time of Timur, because it was he who destroyed the power of the Volga Tatars under whose yoke the Russians had toiled for 200 years. It was only after the death of Timur that the Dukes of Moscow and St. Petersburg started the consolidation of their national territory, changing in the process the history of the world.

In making this assessment of Timur, it must be remembered that he was a devout Muslim who carried a portable royal mosque with his army. His entourage always included *ulema* and *kadis*. But it must also be remembered that most of his conquests-and his destructions-were also directed at Muslims. Islamic history, since the time of Muawiya, has been subject to a tension between the super-ordinate values of Islam and the more mundane values of material gain and personal ego. We see this tension in the extreme in the person of Timur. Whenever he conquered a territory, he took great care not to destroy the mosques and Sufi tombs or to kill the *ulema*. But he was a born warrior whose instincts for battle impelled him to seek the mastery of the known world. The secular instincts in him won over the sacred, the love of power triumphed over the injunctions not to shed the blood of fellow believers. He was lenient to those who accepted his mastership but was merciless to those who opposed him. These two currents, the secular and the sacred, run in parallel throughout Islamic history.

Timur was a Tatar and was born in Khorasan near Samarqand in 1327. In an age when the royal scepter was won by the sword, Central Asia was the cradle of conquerors and would-be conquerors. The horsemen of Central Asia poured forth time and again, conquering the more settled inhabitants of northern India, Persia and territories beyond. In time, they would settle down among the local population, only to be invaded by a fresh wave of nomads from the Asian plateau. Timur grew up in this cradle of conquerors, embodying in his person an instinct for war and intrigue that has rarely been surpassed in world history.

As a young man, Timur was influenced by a Sufi Shaykh Zainuddin and he retained a healthy respect for things spiritual. The Chagtai Empire had all but disintegrated. The last of the Mongol Chagtai rulers had retreated beyond the Amu Darya. The Mongol Khan Tughlaq had appointed Kazgan, a Tatar, as the viceroy of Samarqand. Timur sought his first job serving Kazgan. The young man's valor was soon recognized at the court and he became a favorite of the *bahadurs*, the elite guard. Kazgan was so impressed by the young man that he offered his own granddaughter, the beautiful Aljai Khatun, for whom the beautiful tomb of Bibi Khanum in Samarqand is named.

Timur's marriage to the Aljai Khatun Agha, granddaughter of Kazgan, was a happy one. Aljai, like Timur, was a Muslim. Like her Tatar sisters from Central Asia, she rode a horse without a veil, participated in affairs of the state, accompanied her husband to theaters of war and ministered to public affairs in her domain of authority. She bore Timur a son who was named Jehangir. In recognition of Timur's services, Kazgan made him a *Ming-bashi* (leader of 1,000 horsemen). But the times were too unstable for Timur to enjoy his peace and quiet for long. The region was seething with unrest, filled with armed men, able and ambitious, each with his dream of glory and riches.

Kazgan was killed in an internal squabble among the Tatars and the territory was thrown into chaos. To restore order, the Mongol Khan Tughlaq descended from the north. Timur supported Tughlaq and was rewarded with the title *Tuman-Bashi*, leader of 10,000 horsemen. But when Tughlaq returned north to his home base, his tyrannical general Bikujuk turned on the Tatars, imprisoned their learned men and carried off their women and children. Timur resisted, did what he could to save the women and the children, but the dissensions among the Tatars were too deep for united action. When the Mongol Khan Tughlaq heard that Timur had fought his appointed general, he gave orders for Timur's capture and death. With the instincts of a shrewd warrior, Timur sensed a disaster and fled south with his bride and his loyal followers.

Great men are made by adversity. Over the next several years, Timur wandered through the hills of Afghanistan and the deserts of Turkoman lands. He felt the scorching heat of the desert and experienced the blistering winds of the Hindu Kush Mountains. It was during these wanderings, while trying to help the chief of Qandahar put down a local rebellion, that Timur was struck by an arrow to his foot, which left him limping for the rest of his life and earned him the title, Timurlane (Timur Leng, or Timur the Lame).

Throughout Islamic history, Muslim people have used the call of faith to rally the faithful against foreign domination. The oppression of the Mongols was unbearable for the Tatars. The *ulema* and Sufis of Bukhara and Samarqand appealed to the Tatar chieftains to unite and stand up to the Mongols. The Tatars heeded the call and in 1367, fought a pitched battle against the Mongols at the Syr Darya. All the Tatar emirs, the Afghans, Persians from northern Persia and Timur participated. Fate was against the Tatars and they lost. But the city of itself held. Each encounter increased Timur's standing with his people. His determination, courage and leadership in war impressed them. The Tatars were ready for

united action and what was needed was a leader. The *ulema* and the Sufis, the emirs and the chieftains met in Samarqand and elected Timur as their leader in 1368. This was the beginning of the Timurid Empire and a turning point in world history.

Timur consolidated his base around Samarqand, cultivating the loyalty of friend and foe alike through gifts, titles and endowments. His first action was to clear the Mongols from Tatar areas south of the Amu Darya. This was followed up with raids beyond the river into the Mongol heartland. In a series of battles fought between 1370 and 1379, the Mongol hold over the valley of Farghana was broken. Conflict between a strong Timurid presence in Samarqand and his neighbors was inevitable. The Tatars of Khorasan and the had long profited by raiding the Tatars in the Farghana valley. Their Chief, Yusuf challenged Timur but died of natural causes before a conclusive battle between the two could take place. Timur proceeded to annex Khorasan, Khiva and the lower Volga basin to his domain. Turning his attention south to Afghanistan, he displaced the Emir of Herat, Ghiasuddin and added this city to his dominions. Herat was the first of the great cities to fall into Timur's hands. At that time, it had more than a quarter of a million inhabitants and rivaled Tabriz, Damascus and Delhi as a center of learning, art and culture. Timur carried off the wealth of Herat and its many artisans and architects, a pattern he would repeat after the conquests of Isfahan, Delhi, Tabriz, Damascus and Ankara. After each conquest, the wealth of Samarqand grew and the city was transformed into a veritable paradise of blue-domed mosques and mausoleums. Timur's power in Central Asia was now unchallenged and his flag fluttered from the Amu Darya to the Indus. From the plateau of the Hindu Kush mountains, the great conqueror could look down upon the vast expanse of Asia and Europe, ready to profit from the devastations of the Black Plague which had devastated much of the old world between 1336 and 1370.

Campaigns around the Caspian Sea brought Timur face to face with the Tatars of the Volga (the Golden Horde). The Golden Horde had kept Russia at bay for more than 200 years, raiding eastern Europe as far as Poland and Hungary. The Russian counts were obliged to pay an annual tribute to the Tatars. When they did not (or could not) they were severely punished, their territories invaded and plundered. Resistance was futile and retribution was swift and merciless. In 1376, Dimitrius, Count of Moscow, gathered together 100,000 armed Russian peasants and defeated a platoon of the Golden Horde in a battle on the River Don. The following year, the Golden Horde returned, razing the land as they followed the retreating Russians. In 1377, they burned down the city of Moscow.

Toktamish, chief of the Golden Horde, could not tolerate the growing power of Timur to the east. Their two egos clashed. As the Mongol saying went, "the world could not have two suns at the same time". A dispute over borders provided the cause for hostilities. In an initial skirmish near the Caspian Sea, Toktamish was trounced, but he returned the following year to raid border areas. This time, Timur followed him deep into enemy territory. He was always meticulous in his planning and made his moves with the dexterity of a grand chess master. Great generals succeed, in part because they plan their campaigns with the utmost care, down to the minutest detail. The careful preparations made by Timur during this grand march remind us of similar preparations made by Genghiz Khan in 1218-1219 when he crossed the Gobi Desert on his way to Khorasm. Every soldier was given an extra horse and was provided with defensive armor as well as bows, arrows, a sword and smaller weapons. Marching with him were not only the Tatars from the valley of Farghana, but Afghans, Turks and Persians. Timur's pursuit of Toktamish took him 2,000 miles into Russia, past the Rivers Ural and Volga, through the modern city of Kazan to the outskirts of Moscow. Overtaken by Timur's scouts, Toktamish was forced to give battle. It was a battle of titans. Timur, a great master of cavalry maneuvers on the open plains, prevailed. Toktamish was forced to flee. The remnants of his army were pursued and cut down.

The power of the Golden Horde was smashed, never to appear again as a cohesive force in eastern Europe. This was the year 1385, an important landmark in global history, when an empire died and a new empire was born. It was Timur who freed Russia from the Tatars. It was only after 1385 that Russia began to emerge as a European power that grew, over the centuries, through consolidation and conquest, to occupy much of eastern Europe and northern Asia. For the better part of the 20th century, it dominated the landmass of Eurasia as the former Soviet Union.

Great men are born with an indomitable spirit, to excel, to dominate, to conquer. Perhaps it is through them that humankind fights its losing battle to conquer death itself. Timur was made of the same metal as Alexander, Genghiz Khan and Napoleon. He went for world conquest not just because he considered himself heir to the empire of Genghiz, but also because it was there, in the same sense that men and women want to climb Mount Everest, because it is there. Timur came closer than anyone in history to realizing his dream. Were it not for his death on his way towards the conquest of China, he might well have succeeded.

After the conquest of Russia, Timur consolidated his position as the Emir of all Tatars. From the heights of Central Asia, he could look down upon the decaying empires of Persia, India and China and feel the same urge that a mighty lion feels when he comes across a herd of wounded sheep. To the south of his empire lay Persia. The Il-Khans, descendants of Genghiz Khan, had succumbed to the pleasures of Persia and had disappeared. In their place had emerged the Muzaffars, a family notorious in history for internal squabbles. When the Shah of Persia, an ally and protégée of Timur died, his son Zainul Abedin ascended the throne. Zainul proved to be a weakling, unable to hold his territories together. Whereupon, the family of Muzaffars seized power, carving up Persia into small fiefdoms, ruled by different members of the family. Tabriz, Isfahan, Shiraz and Herat each had its own king.

The instability to the south of his borders was intolerable to Timur. In 1386, he marched again. The destination was the city of Isfahan, noted at that time, as it is today, for its beauty as well as its magnificent monuments and learned people. The city offered no resistance and opened its gates. Timur promised not to plunder the city if a ransom was paid. Out went the noblemen of Isfahan to collect the demanded booty. All was quiet for a day. Then, in the darkness of night, some of the townsfolk attacked Timur's guards. In retrospect, it is not clear what happened, but the result was a disaster for the city. In the morning, Timur gave a general order for a massacre. The inhabitants of the city were hunted down and a mountain of skulls was created in the main bazaar. This was the first of the general massacres that Timur is noted for, something that he was to repeat later in Lahore, Delhi, Damascus and dozens of lesser cities. Almost 100,000 Isfahanis was killed. Timur, having obliterated all resistance, appointed his own governor in the city. Shiraz submitted without a fight. From there, Timur lunged south to the Persian Gulf and marched back northwards in an arc subduing the tribes of Qandahar and western Afghanistan. It was during this campaign that Timur cleared the mountain hideouts of the Fatimid Assassins. After Timur, the Assassins ceased to be a dreaded force that they once were in the body politic of Islam. Timur returned home to Samarqand, with the treasures of the looted cities, as well as many of the noted scholars, artisans and architects of Persia. The latter he put to work, to embellish his own city, which became in his lifetime a veritable garden of blue-tiled domes. By now, Timur was the master of Russia, Central Asia and Persia.

The addition of Persia to Timur's empire caused an alarm in Baghdad, Cairo and Ankara. Shah Ahmed of Baghdad looked to the Mamluke Turks of Cairo for protection. Cairo was at the time the premier city of Islam and the seat of the Caliphate. The Mamlukes controlled Egypt, Syria, Arabia and all the lands to the west of the Euphrates. As custodians of the Caliphate, the Mamlukes were bound to come to the help of the Sultan of Baghdad. An alliance was formed between Sultan Ahmed of Baghdad and the

Mamlukes of Egypt. The first act of the alliance was to dethrone Timur's governor from Isfahan and install a satrap, Mansur, as the lord of Baghdad. This drew the wrath of Timur. He advanced against Persia a second time. The Muzaffar chieftains were quickly subdued, but his real target was Baghdad. Ahmed, Sultan of Baghdad, knew the strength of the Tatars and fearful of retribution for his misdeeds, fled towards Syria, hotly pursued by Timur's soldiers. He reached Damascus safely, but lost all of his treasures and his household to the Tatars. Timur established his governor in Baghdad and returned to his homeland. To the Mamluke sultan, he sent a letter, offering peace, security and trade provided he stopped meddling in the affairs of Persia and Baghdad. The Mamluke sultan spurned the offer, slew Timur's ambassador, marched across the Euphrates to Baghdad and reinstalled Sultan Ahmed in the old city of the Abbasid Caliphs.

The gauntlet was now thrown and the die was cast. Conflict between Timur, Lord of the east and the Mamlukes became inevitable. Timur was in no haste because he knew that a westward march might lead to a clash of arms with the powerful Ottomans. He had a masterful grasp of global politics and he moved with the deliberation of a grand strategist. In 1398, he made his move. First, he advanced south through the Hindu Kush Mountains and Afghanistan to Kabul. With the dexterity of a master chess player, he wanted to eliminate any threat to his rear as he advanced westward. Timur also needed the funds for his campaigns into Syria. A letter was sent to Sultan Mahmud of Delhi, the last of the fading Tughlaq dynasty, demanding his surrender. Sultan Mahmud was not ready to submit, so the Tatars moved through the Punjab towards Delhi. Unable to face the Tatars in battle, Mahmud fled south to Gujrat. Timur's stay in Delhi was a repeat of his stay in Isfahan twelve years earlier. Under the pretext that some townspeople had attacked his soldiers, Timur ordered a general slaughter. Over 150,000 men, women and children were killed and pyramids of skulls were erected in the bazaars of Delhi. Timur appointed one of his grandsons, Pir Muhammed as his deputy in Hindustan and retreated by way of Meerat and Kashmir, carrying with him the wealth of India and a large number of artisans and architects.

The impact of Timurid massacres on the subcontinent was profound. Many of the great Sufis and *ulema* fled from the advancing Tatars into the outlying provinces. Of these, Gaysu Daraz, the Shaykh of the Chishtiya order, is noteworthy. He migrated south to Deccan, where he established his *zawiyah* in Gulbarga and worked ceaselessly to propagate Islam. He was the first to write extensively in Dakhni, the southern branch of Urdu. The origin of Urdu poetry dates to this period. Later, Urdu flourished in the north and became a superb medium of expression by the 18th century. In addition to the Deccan, Bengal, Jaunpur, Gujrat and Malwa received a large influx of Sufis and scholars. Among these, Shaykh Ahmed and Shaykh Shahabuddin of Jaunpur as well as Shaykh Ali of Mahim (modern Bombay) are noteworthy. It was also during this period that Multan and the Punjab received a fresh influx of Suhrwardi Sufis, although the Suhrwardi order had been established in Multan by Bahauddin Zikriya (d. 1262) early in the 13th century.

Politically, the Timurid invasion hastened the disintegration of the subcontinent into regional powers. Gone was the central authority that had been forged by Alauddin Khilji and Malik Kafur (1300 to 1320). Mahmud Tughlaq, who had fled to Gujrat before Timur, returned to reclaim his throne, but his dominions were limited to a few miles around the city. Bengal was already independent and remained so until its conquest by Sher Shah Suri in 1538. Gujrat flourished and with it the city of Ahmedabad became a prime center of culture and art. The golden period of Ahmedabad belongs to this era. To the south, the kingdoms of Ahmednagar, Bijapur, Birar, Bidar and Golkonda (modern Hyderabad) established themselves and attracted a large number of Sufis fleeing the Tatar advance. Further south, the prosperous Hindu court of Vijayanagar rose up, displaying a rare ebullience of human energy in this period of global turbulence. To the west, Multan and Sindh asserted their independence. The

subcontinent had remained under a central authority for fifty years until the death of Muhammed bin Tughlaq (1351). After Timur, that unity was not to return until the Great Moghuls (1526-1707) arrived on the scene.

Having silenced Delhi and collected a rich booty to finance his campaigns, Timur headed towards Baghdad, Damascus and Ankara for a confrontation with the powerful western powers of Islam.

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