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Timurids

Medieval Islamic Civilization, An Encyclopaedia

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The Timurids were a dynasty of Central Asian nomadic origin that dominated the Middle East and Central Asia in the 8th AH (14th CE) and 9th AH (15th CE) centuries. The founder, Timur Leng, was a Chagatai Turk of the Barlas tribe in the region of Kish, Western Turkestan. The significant period of his career began in 771AH (1370 CE), when he embarked on a series of campaigns in Transoxiana that involved the Chagatai khanate in Eastern Turkestan, the Blue Horde, and the Golden Horde. In 782AH (1380-1301 CE), he began his conquests in Persia, subduing the local dynasties that had assumed power after the disintegration of the Il Khanate, including the Sarbadars in northwestern Khurasan, the Karts in Herat, the Muzaffarids in central and southern Persia, and the Jalayarids centred on Baghdad. He also campaigned against the Mamluk sultanate of Egypt and defeated the Ottoman sultan Bayazid Ilderim at the battle of Ankara in 804 AH (1402 CE).

Timur's conquests brought about the movement of large numbers of artists and artisans to his capital, Samarqand, as a workforce to embellish and enrich his court. The lavish results of this are perhaps most vividly portrayed in the account by the Spanish ambassador, Clavijo, who visited Samarqand and Timur's palace at Aq Sarai in 1404-1406 CE. Timur's legitimacy was established on two bases, apart from conquest and his control of the Chagatai tribes: by his marriage to a Chingissid princess that gave him the concomitant title of *guregen* (royal son-in-law [of the puppet Chingissid khan he installed in Samarqand]), and by his claim to be the true protector and upholder of Islam. It was on this basis that his campaigns in Persia, Iraq, Syria and Anatolia were justified in contemporary accounts. He made effective use of the Chagatai nomads and their traditional military skills in his campaigns, and areas that resisted him suffered considerably. Like Chingiz Khan, he punished any opposition or rebellion ruthlessly and speedily. For instance, virtually all of the Muzaffarids were executed when one of them, Shah Mansur, attempted to re-establish independent rule. Direct Timurid control of conquered territories in Persia and Khurasan was based on installing military governors (usually Timurid princes) along with garrisons of Chagatai soldiery in various cities and provinces. At the time of his death in 807AH (1405 CE), Timur was embarking on the conquest of China.

After Timur's death, a series of conflicts broke out between his sons and grandsons. The eventual victor, his son Shah Rukh, did not attempt any fresh conquests and indeed during the war of succession certain peripheral territories, such as those in the Caucasus, were lost. However, the heartlands of the empire remained untouched, and from his capital in Herat Shah Rukh consolidated his control of the regions of Persia (most of what is now Afghanistan and Central Asia) with a series of Timurid princes and Chagatai khans as governors of the various

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provinces. The most important of these was his son, Ulugh Beg, who was the ruler of Transoxania throughout his father's reign. Both rulers were patrons of the arts, architecture and literature, and Ulugh Beg was an able mathematician who drew up mathematical tables and built an observatory in Samarqand. Likewise, Shah Rukh's wife, Gauhar Shad, who in particular created religious foundations, built the great mosque in Mashad, northern Persia, one of the surviving monuments of the Timurid age. Iskandar b. Umar Shaikh, who ruled Fars and was eventually imprisoned and blinded for his rebellious activities in 816AH (1413 CE), was a notable patron of painting and the arts of the book. The development of historical writing under the Timurids is one of the most important intellectual aspects of the period. For example, Hafiz Abru employed different approaches to the history of the age, his works comprising a unique achievement of sophisticated and detailed historical literature. First, he wrote the continuation (*zayl*) of the World History of Rashid al-Din Tabib, then a series of provincial histories and dynastic studies, and finally the *Majma'*, a general history of which the last section, the *Zubdat al-Tawarikh*, presents a dynastic history of the Timurids. Current knowledge about the political history of the period is based on these and other works, such as Sharaf al-Din 'Ali Yazdi's biography of Timur, the *Zafarnama*, the *Matla' al-Sa'dain* of 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Samarqandi, and the works of Mir Khwand and Khwand Amir.

Shah Rukh died on campaign in Western Persia in 850 AH (1447 CE) and once again conflict broke out between the Timurid princes. Other powers in the region, such as the Turkoman confederacies in Azarbaijan, also became involved in the struggle with the result that the empire was further fragmented and diminished. Timurid rule in the west was effectively ended, and, by the late 15th century, Transoxania had succumbed to the advances of the Uzbek, Muhammad Shaibani. However, in Khurasan, the Timurid capital Herat enjoyed what was to be a final efflorescence under Sultan Husain Baiqara as a centre of learning and the arts. When Shah Ismail Safavi captured the city in 916 AH (1510 CE), the artists of the royal ateliers were transported west to serve the Safavid court, thus perpetuating the artistic traditions that had been developed under the Timurids.

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