



Portrait of Amir Timur. Source: OrexCA.com at <http://tiny.cc/mvhg6w>.

# AMIR TIMUR

## Paragon of Medieval Statecraft or Central Asian Psychopath?

By Sebastian P. Bartos and John P. Dunn

*He was spirited and brave and inspired awe and obedience.  
He loved bold and brave soldiers by whose aid  
he opened the locks of terror . . .*

—Muhammad ibn Arabshah<sup>1</sup>

Amir Timur (1336-1405) challenges teachers in several ways. How do you present him and medieval Central Asia to students with little previous knowledge? How can world history teachers accomplish this without expending too much of their most limited resource: time? These are tall orders, but one should still consider their fulfillment. Doing so clearly demonstrates Central Asia's once pivotal role connecting Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia while introducing a controversial leader whose legacy is debated to this day. They might not know Timur coming into your class, but few will forget him when they leave.

Beatrice Forbes Manz, one of Timur's best biographers, argues his story possesses "a stature bigger than life and a charisma bordering on the supernatural."<sup>2</sup> A mover and shaker of the first order, Timur was the last nomadic leader to create a massive steppe-based empire. His armies briefly dominated much of Central Asia and the Middle East, established the Timurid dynasty, and gathered loot and tribute that allowed for splendid buildings in his capital city of Samarkand. These same armies leveled enemy cities, massacred urban populations, and left pyramids of human skulls to mark their passing. Historian Iris Chang, seeking to put the 1937 Japanese "Rape of Nanking" in perspective, argued these armies "outdid even some of the monstrosities of Timur."<sup>3</sup> Speaking only a few years later, Islam Karimov, long-serving president of Uzbekistan, called on fellow Uzbeks to embrace Timur as a model of excellence for his development of a strong central government; support of economic growth; and patronage of art, religion, and science.

Karimov and Chang succinctly demonstrate the mixed message of Timur's accomplishments. Was he a cagey politician, warlord, patron of the arts, stalwart benefactor of Sufi mystics, or mass murderer who could compete with Mao Zedong and Pol Pot? Contemporaries called him the Sahib Qiran, "master of the confluence of planets," figuring so much good fortune could only result from divine intervention. This wine drinking Sunni Muslim, who claimed descent from Ali, probably knew better. Timur, like many great leaders, made his own luck. He knew when to act and, like his name implied, he had an iron will. He played a critical role in Central Asian history, and whether you prefer the views of Chang or Karimov, Timur is very worthy of inclusion in a world history class.

### Young Timur—A Steppe-Based Model for Horatio Alger?

Timur's career starts far from the top. He was born in Transoxiana, part of the Chaghadayid Khanate, a polity that included most of modern Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and parts of Mongolia and China's Xinjiang Province. A century removed from the glory days of Genghis Khan, the Mongol world empire had split into many different nations. The Black Death helped fuel this devolution; and even if pestilence bypassed a region, massive fatalities elsewhere disrupted trade, dramatically decreased agricultural production, and undermined government. Nomads were least likely to be hit hard by the plague and might even benefit from its disruptions. Timur's family was from the nomadic Barlas Clan, Sunni Muslims, and Turkicized Mongols who claimed descent from Genghis Khan. These Mongols maintained their traditional nomadic lifestyle but unlike their predecessors were more closely integrated both politically and economically with large cities like Samarkand or Bukhara. Timur liked to promote his connections to Genghis and could follow in the foot-

steps of his illustrious ancestor—but only so far. Mongol life had changed in the last century. It was more sophisticated, and to rise in power, young warriors had to recognize the new Central Asian symbiosis between nomads and urban folk—you could not rule one without the other.

His parents were not clan leaders, yet steppe culture provided considerable room for young men seeking to raise themselves by their own bootstraps. How? Master the bow and saber, wed these to superb equestrian skills, build a following of like-minded youths, and launch raids against rival clans. Horse and sheep raiding allowed successful commanders to grow their followings or junior warriors to start amassing wealth to attract their own gang. Clan and tribal loyalty often took second place to victory; an effective leader overcame such problems. He also took his chances in the front ranks. Timur embraced this strategy and picked up a nickname when enemy arrows took off some fingers and permanently injured a leg. Returning to camp, he was dubbed Timur i-Lenk ("Timur the Lame"), and from this comes an older English version of his name: Tamerlane.

As Timur gathered booty, his fame attracted followers and the need for lieutenants. He had a knack for maximizing the value of such men while minimizing their potential for mischief. Throughout his career, Timur kept a firm hand on the levers of power, and while capable of delegating limited

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authority, he often did this only with trusted family members or for specific tasks, followed by reward and then rapid transfer to avoid the buildup of a rival power base. He became clan leader in 1360, and ten years later, Timur controlled Samarkand, which became his seat of power and favorite city. Timur married female descendants of Genghis Khan to increase his legitimacy, and although embracing the title Amir (“prince”), he never called himself a khan or sultan. This was based on Central Asian traditions that restricted royalty to specific bloodlines. Although not immune to imaginary genealogy, like portraying himself as a descendant of Ali, Muhammad the Messenger’s son-in-law, this humble stature was a trademark of Timur’s statecraft. It may also have been a realization that titles were far less important than a powerful army, and the troops who fought for Timur clearly provided him with an excellent military.

### Timur’s Formidable Army

Central Asian armies were cavalry-oriented. Nomads maintained large horse herds that learned to ride from childhood and flourished in the steppe environment. Timur recruited soldiers from as far away as the Levant and Mongolia, but his most trusted troopers came from Transoxiana. Timurid armies were numerous, uniformed, disciplined, and loyal. In many ways, his army was the state, as a traveling court journeyed with Timur, and he was far more likely to be in the field—albeit in a luxurious, oversized tent—than in Samarkand.

Composite bows, smaller and stronger than “selfbows,” like the English longbow, were the primary weapon of Timur’s army and particularly suited for use from horseback. Made by skilled craftsmen, who applied equal skill in the construction of arrows, these were Central Asian weapons of choice dating from antiquity and still used into the early nineteenth century. It took years to become a good archer, but nomad boys started practice at ages three to four. When teens, most had the ability to fire twelve arrows in a minute and hit mass targets at 200 feet. They usually did this mounted, using their knees to control the horse. Although it was cavalry who won most pitched battles, Timur needed well-trained infantry to operate catapults and attack fortifications. His armies were very good at siege warfare, besting both Islamic and Christian defenders in Iraq, Anatolia, and Syria. In addition, Timur was willing to experiment, introducing novel weapons systems when needed. One example of this was his use of barbed caltrops (a four-spiked iron ball laid upon the ground) to wound or divert Indian war elephants during the attack on Delhi in December 1398. The surviving beasts were captured, and along with their mahouts (drivers) and wooden fighting towers, used much more successfully against the Ottomans four years later.

Timur enhanced his formidable armies with novel tactics that altered Central Asian tradition. Most commanders divided their soldiers into a center plus flanking wings, maybe keeping an elite troop of bodyguards in reserve. Timur divided his armies into seven main divisions: three in front, three in support, and one final reserve to their rear. In fast-moving cavalry battles, the ability to throw in fresh horses and riders at a critical moment often produced victory. Timur’s use of multiple reserves made his soldiers far more dangerous than most of their opponents.

### Timur and His Rivals

Central Asia sat astride the Silk Roads. Until Portuguese seafarers navigated alternative routes to India and the “spice islands” in the 1500s, this was the nexus for East-West trade. Dominating the Silk Roads guaranteed



Forensic facial reconstruction of Timur by M. Gerasimov, 1941. Source: <http://tiny.cc/dvc16w>.

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a significant revenue flow and also guaranteed jealous neighbors who wanted to redirect that revenue flow.

Thus we meet Tokhtamysh, a Mongol leader attempting to reunite the Golden Horde (Altin Urda). Formerly a great Eurasian power that stretched from the Ukraine to Siberia, it fractured during the 1360s. Timur offered to help Tokhtamysh, but once the latter achieved reunification, he moved to take lands located in what is today Georgia and Azerbaijan. Technically, these belonged to yet another Mongol dynasty, the Ilkhanids, once rulers of a greater Iran but divided into four rival principalities by the late 1330s. Tokhtamysh and Timur raced to carve up their Mongol relatives but quickly came to blows over cities that were connected to the Silk Roads, as well as contesting the province of Azerbaijan.

Tokhtamysh aimed to grab Azerbaijan, once the center of Ilkanid power and blessed with spacious pasture lands that could support large cavalry forces to dominate the rest of Iran. The ensuing war saw Timurid forces march as far west as the Ukraine, defeating Tokhtamysh in two major battles, then chase the fleeing Khan all the way to Siberia, where they finally killed him in 1406. In between, Timur leveled numerous cities like Sarai, Azov, and Astrakhan that supported Tokhtamysh or could serve as entrepôts that might divert Silk Roads’ revenues from his preferred route via Transoxiana.

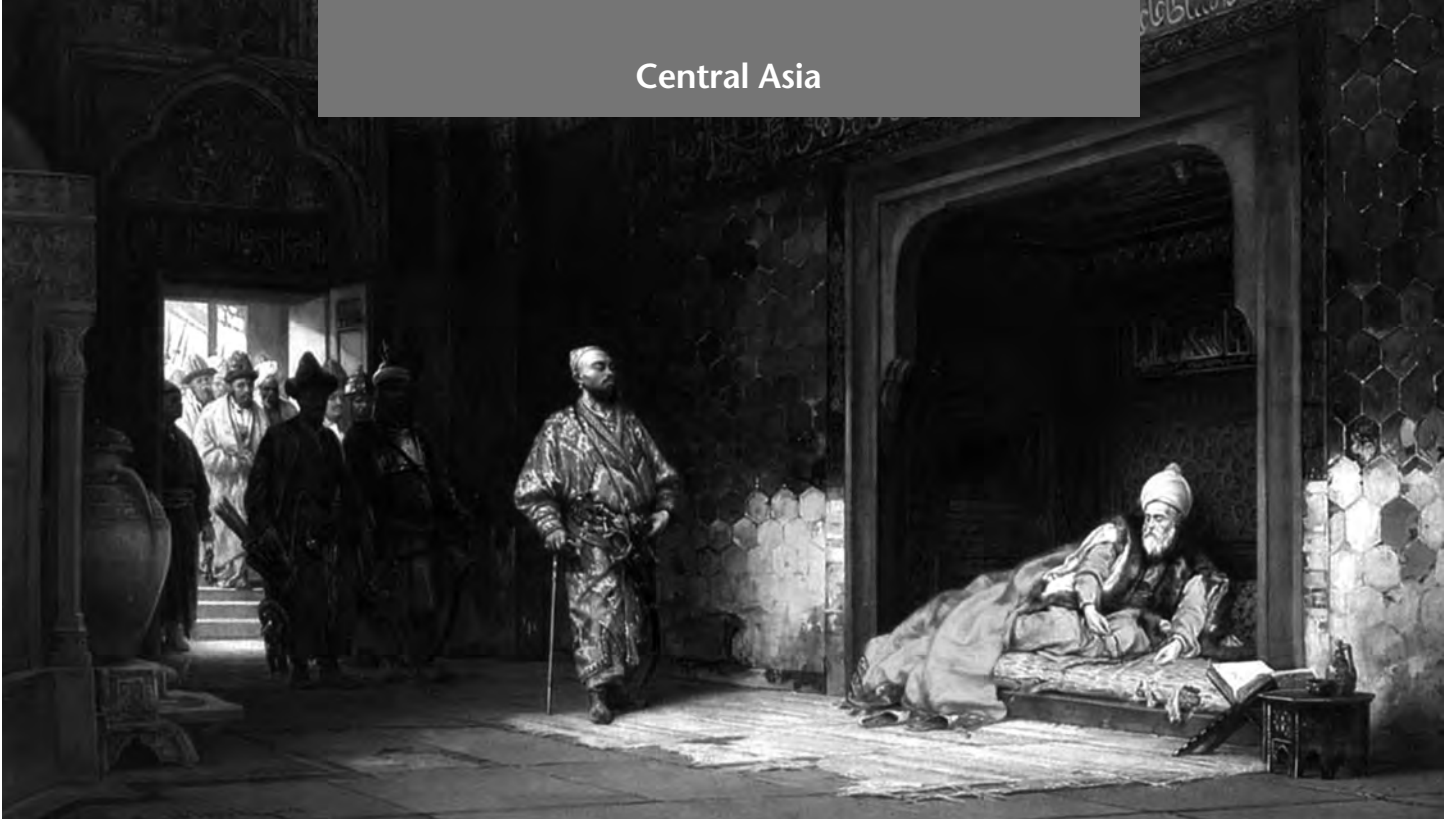
Although Silk Roads’ revenues always figured in Timurid strategies, the Sahib Qiran maintained a powerful ego and fought Tokhtamysh partially to avenge the ingratitude of a former ally. One insulted Timur at great peril; he might wait to strike

back, but he never forgot and almost always exacted cruel and devastating justice. Injure or kill his lieutenants, embezzle his revenues, rebel, or poke fun at his religiosity; and hell would come to your homeland. Just ask the people of Delhi in 1398 or Baghdad and Damascus three years later. The latter attempted to shortchange the Shahib Qiran on a large indemnity, providing local coins with significantly lower value than the Central Asian standard. Timur’s response was to organize a street-by-street looting expedition. An eyewitness, Ibn Khaldun, described Timurid soldiers entering Damascus like “a swarm of locusts” who “proceeded to pillage and plunder, torture and ravish with untold inhumanity.”<sup>4</sup> Timur’s revenge could also feature the murder of entire populations, followed by his trademark pyramids of human skulls. Eyewitness Castilian diplomat Ruy Gonzáles de Clavijo described these “monuments” as taller than one could hurl a rock.

### Timur the Strategist—Core State and Vassals

Medieval Central Asian soldiers were a hardy and fast-moving lot. As evidenced by the struggle with Tokhtamysh, they could travel long distances and deliver deadly blows. On the other hand, they were less effective at holding territory. Timur understood his army and recognized its limitations. Rich agricultural lands like Iran, the Ferghana Valley, or Khwarezm (a large oasis south of the Aral Sea) provided regular surpluses that converted into government revenues. Steppe lands farther north were far less profitable and more difficult to defend, thus more easily given to others.

Timur realized strategic positions or trade routes could convert otherwise unattractive lands into valuable real estate but was focused on the possible. His army was probably the best in Central Asia, but it could not be everywhere at all times. It also required considerable resources for food, weapons, and rewards. With these factors in mind, it is possible to view several Timurid ventures not as campaigns of conquest but rather massive raids to reduce the power of potential rivals and provide his soldiery with



This painting shows imprisoned Ottoman Sultan Bayezit. Timur is the standing figure. Source: Iranian photographs gallery at <http://tiny.cc/uhaf5w>.

much appreciated loot. Indeed, military historian David Nicolle argued, “Timur might have been a great soldier, but in purely historical terms he could be seen as the greatest bandit of all times.”<sup>25</sup>

### Timur the General—Ankara (1402)

The Battle of Ankara (July 28, 1402) shows Timur and his army at their best. Facing Ottoman Sultan Bayezit (1347–1403) with an army of 85,000, Timur massed a superior force of about 140,000, mainly cavalry, but also including war elephants brought from India. Timur had skillfully maneuvered his forces to pass through lands of disaffected tribal leaders nominally aligned with the Ottomans. Many forgot their oaths of allegiance and threw in with the Timurid horde. Thus, despite bringing the fight to the Ottoman backyard, Timur maintained a rather significant advantage in numbers.

Still, it would be unwise to dismiss the subsequent fight as a foregone conclusion. Ottoman troops included elite Janissaries, plus other Turkish infantry and numerous horsemen. Many of the latter were recently conquered Turcomans or Tartars, supported by a hard core of Ottoman sipahi heavy cavalry. There was even a troop of Serbian knights and Orthodox Christians fulfilling their obligations as vassals of Bayezit. Outnumbered, the Sultan opted for a defensive battle, one where his infantry would provide a steadfast shield behind which his cavalry could rest, waiting for poorly executed Timurid maneuvers to expose opportunities for a nasty riposte or even a decisive counterattack. To enhance these tactics, the Ottomans deployed along a stream and on several hills. Infantry were in the center, sipahi units on each flank, and the heavy cavalry was guarded in turn by Turcoman or Tatar light cavalry.

Despite Bayezit’s sound deployment, Timur demonstrated superior generalship in several ways. First, he ordered a diversion of the Cubuk Creek, which reduced Ottoman water supplies. Horses required large quantities of

water in hot Anatolian summers, even more so than men. Dehydrated Ottoman cavalry suffered as a result. Next, Timur launched well-timed shock actions, delivered in rapid succession. His initial assaults stripped away the enemy flanks. This happened first on the Ottoman left until the Serbs counterattacked. Moving too far, they were disordered and fell back beyond their initial position. Next, several defections undermined the Ottoman position. On both flanks, groups of Tartars and Turcoman deserted to Timur. Then came the elephants, whose size, trumpeting roars, and human crew riding on a wooden castle frightened off even more horsemen. This uncovered the infantry, allowing Timur’s heavy cavalry to launch decisive flank attacks.

Bayezit saw this possibility and ordered his remaining Janissaries to support the Serbs, who still fought on the right wing. Although encircled by victorious Timurid forces, this last Ottoman formation repulsed several attacks, holding until nightfall. Late in the evening, Bayezit led a breakout but was captured after his horse stumbled. The loss of Bayezit and 40,000 men threw the Ottoman state into civil war. Timur attempted a reordering of Anatolia and Syria, trying to restore anti-Ottoman leaders who could slow a restoration and serve as buffer states. Having already cowed Mamluk Egypt, Timur was ready to head eastward to settle accounts with China’s Ming dynasty.

### Timur the Builder

Samarkand, wrote Clavijo, was under continual construction day and night. He complained the noise “was such that it seemed like all the devils of Hell were at work here.”<sup>26</sup> This was the flip side of “Timur the Barbarian.” He leveled other cities but lavished money and talent for the beautification of Transoxiana. Timur often spared artisans from captured populations, deporting vast numbers of rug-makers, glassblowers, calligraphers, potters, and jewelers to Samarkand. He also supported and even helped design colossal architecture that glorified his cities; Islam; and, of course, himself. Examples include the



Yasavi Mausoleum. Source: MIT Libraries website at <http://tiny.cc/rcbf5w>.

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Yasavi Mausoleum in modern Kazakhstan, which honored a famous Sufi leader who died in 1166. Sufism, the mystical side of Islam, had a long and positive connection with Central Asian Muslims; Timur was no exception to this tradition, regularly supporting Sufi mystics. He spent a fortune on the Yasavi Mausoleum, an immense multidomed shrine that was incomplete when he died in 1405 yet served as a model for a Timurid aesthetic that extended in space and time to India's Taj Mahal, completed by a descendant of the Sahib Qiran in 1653.

Mosaic and stucco artists from Iran helped create the Yasavi Mausoleum, employing a technique known as *Bunna'i*. This called for alternating glazed tiles with plain bricks to create massive calligraphic displays of Islamic piety or geometric forms that capture one's attention to this day. *Bunna'i* work was also evident in Samarkand's Bibi Khanum Mosque and the Gur-i Amir Cemetery; the latter was designed for Timur's favorite grandson but also served as his own tomb.

### Timur's Legacy

Timur prepared for war with the Yongle Emperor in 1403–1404. The "Pig Emperor," as he called the leader of China's Ming dynasty, had sent a typical Chinese diplomatic mission that implied Timur was a vassal. The Sahib Qiran had already imprisoned then executed the entire entourage of a previous Ming envoy for a similar faux pas. Despite nearing seventy, Timur saw no recourse but to crush China and in doing so restore the Mongol Yuan dynasty that had been overthrown by the Ming in 1368. Based on his record, China was probably lucky that Timur only got as far eastward as Otrar in modern-day Kazakhstan, where he died of natural causes on February 18, 1405.

Dying on campaign may have appealed to Mongol purists, but Timur's demise revealed the flip side of his power base. He had successfully kept lieutenants in check but at the price of never creating a smooth-functioning government. Everything was about Timur, and now that he was dead, there was nobody to take his place. Instead, his heirs fought a six-year conflict over the succession, rapidly shrinking the empire of Sahib Qiran.

So what did he accomplish? Timur's long campaigns against Toktamish permanently weakened the Golden Horde, eliminating a force-blocking expansion by Moscow and the soon-to-be-unified Poland and Lithuania. Another Tirmurid triumph, Ankara, provided fifty more years of life to the moribund Byzantine Empire, while the subsequent shakeup of Anatolia and Syria laid seeds for future Ottoman-Mamluk struggles and the eventual elimination of the latter in 1517.

Although many Timurid campaigns seem more like gigantic raids, the core of his empire—Central Asia—functioned as an administrative center that benefited from East-West merchandizing along the still-prosperous Silk Roads. Samarkand supported Timur's heirs until triumphant Uzbeks ended the reign of Babur. Timur might step in at this point to remind us that, although his great-great-grandson was evicted from Central Asia, he fled to Afghanistan; recouped his losses; then conquered northern India, establishing the Mughal dynasty, which honored the Sahib Qiran until its demise in 1857.<sup>7</sup>

European writers, fascinated by his story, used Timur as a character for novels and plays. Christopher Marlowe wrote *Tamburlaine the Great* in 1587–1588, cementing Tamerlane as the English version of Timur. George Handel produced *Tamerlano*, a 1724 opera, and Edgar Allan Poe wrote a poem titled *Tamerlane* in 1827. Iranians, Turks, and Central Asians know Timur through their historians but also via humorous interaction with the Islamic folk hero Molla Nasreddin.<sup>8</sup>

The Khanate of Kokand, along with Iran's Nadir Shah and its Qajar dynasty, all claimed descent from the Sahib Qiran. Even modern Uzbeks, whose ancestors chased the Timurids out of Central Asia under their Shibanid dynasty, claim Timur as a George Washington-like character. President Islam Karimov

made a 2004 speech lauding Timur's support of religion, culture, and science, along with a knack for developing trade relations and his smashing success as a general. To Karimov, these were models of excellence that his country should emulate. Thus, 700 years after his death, Timur still impacts Central Asia. Certainly such a figure deserves some space in your world history class. ■

### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES ON TIMUR

Clavijo, Ruy González de. *Embassy to Tamerlane 1403-1406*. Translated by Guy Le Strange. New York: Harper, 1928. (One of the most interesting primary sources by Enrique III's envoy to the court of Timur.)

Lentz, Thomas W., and Glenn D. Lowry. *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century Exhibition Catalogue*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.

Manz, Beatrice Forbes. *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. (This is the best biography of Timur and is valuable to teachers and advanced students.)

Nicolle, David. *The Age of Tamerlane*. London: Osprey, 1996. (Nicely done introduction to Timur and his army. Well-illustrated and student-friendly.)

### NOTES

1. David Nicolle, *The Age of Tamerlane* (London: Osprey, 1996), 9.
2. Beatrice Forbes Manz, "Tamerlane's Career and Its Uses," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (2002): 1.
3. Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 5.
4. Stefan Heideman, "Timur's Campmint During the Siege of Damascus in 803/1401," *Les Cahiers de Studia Iranica* (Lesigny: Peeters Press, 1998), 185.
5. Nicolle, 8.
6. Ruy González de Clavijo, *Embassy to Tamerlane 1403-1406*, trans. Guy Le Strange (New York: Harper, 1928), 166.
7. Babur is slightly off track from our essay, but he produced a fascinating autobiography that could connect you with sixteenth-century Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. See Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor, Zahir-ud-din Mohammad Babur*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: Modern Library, 2002).
8. Molla Nasreddin is the Iranian form of this semi-legendary practical joker who may have flourished in the thirteenth century. Thousands of stories are connected to his antics, and many bring a laugh to this day. For a start, see Mulla Nasreddin, *Tales of Nasreddin Khoja: 181 Mulla Nasreddin stories*, trans. Henry D. Barnham (Bethesda: Ibex, 2000).

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