

***The Zafarnāme* by the Persian historian Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Ali Yazdī**

شرف الدین علی یزدی

by Luz Rodríguez

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BL - Or.1359 f.1b and f.2a

Presentation of the manuscript

17.5 X 21.7 cms

The Zafarnāme is considered by Persian writers the perfect model of elegance and historical composition. It is a panegyric written by the Persian historian Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Ali Yazdi, based on the revised historical chronicles that Ibrahim Sultan, a grandson of Timūr (Governor of Fars 1394-1435; Governor of Shiraz 1434-1447) commissioned him to refine after the Sultan was satisfied with the revisions of the Turkic and Persian texts of the historical chronicles collected in situ by Uyghur and Persian scribes during Timūr’s campaigns. The *Zafarnāme* was finished in 1425, translated into French by Petis de la Croix in 1722 and from French into English by John Darby the following year.

Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Ali Yazdi himself defines the *Zafarnāme* as the best book of its kind, because it instructs the reader about the chronology and history of Asia. It illustrates the development of Timūr from his fortune as soldier to the settlement of his empire and the subjection of territories and their

inhabitants to his own law. Great attention to detail is given to subjects that one would consider atrocities.

In this paper I attempt to study in general the literary and historical importance of the *Zafarnāmeḥ*, the character of Timūr, his style of governance and his beliefs, focusing mainly on his concept of diplomacy; administration and justice; economy; role of women; hunting; his military strategies and hierarchy; and the importance of faith, astrology and divine mandate. I will not be focusing on art and architecture, the historical side of the wars or the capture of Bayezid I the Ottoman Sultan in 1402, since most of the books on Timūr are about those subjects.

I would also like to extend my warmest thanks to the organisers of this conference Dr. Alberto Cantera y Dr. Ricardo Muñoz and especially to The Soudavar Memorial Foundation for their unconditional support.

A panegyric text is a published text in praise of someone or something. The panegyric style in Persia and Central Asia was commonly used before the *Zafarnāmeḥ* was written from the time of Silmán of Sáwa, a poet of the Il-khanids (1256-1353).

In the *Zafarnāmeḥ* we see Timūr laying the foundations of a monarchy: sometimes proving himself as soldier, at other times commanding armies and dethroning kings; sometimes forced to quit a conquest and abandoned by everyone, until eventually he settled an empire that covered from what is today, among others, East Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, South West Russia, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.

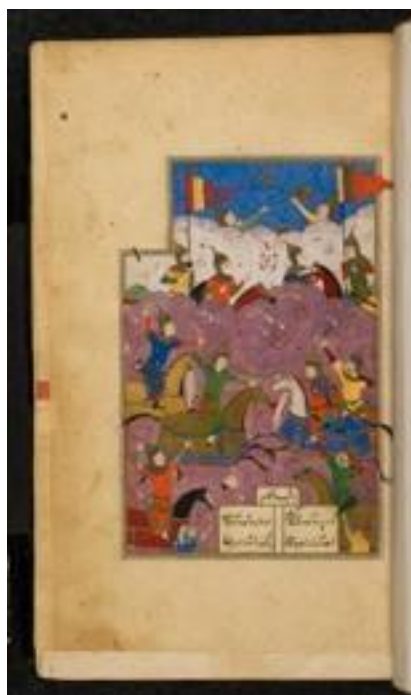
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Character of Timūr



BL Add.7635 - f. 35a

Night battle between Emir Hussein and Timūr at Balkh (1370)

12.2 X 19 cms

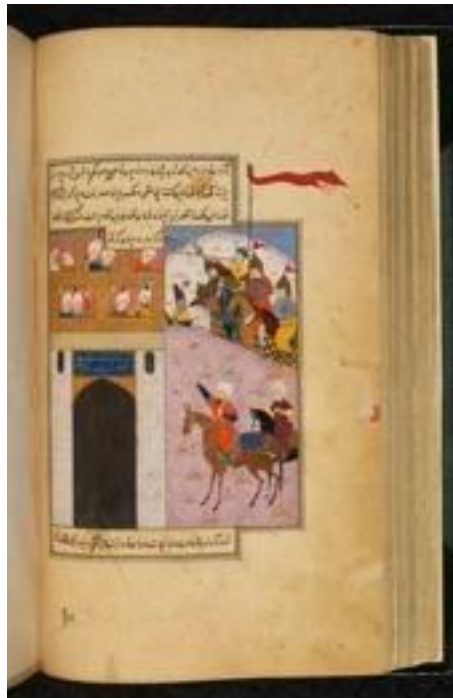
Timūr was born on 9th April 1336 near Shahrizabz. His father, governor of Transoxiana, was a Mongol from the Barlas clan, who had come with the Chaghatays into Mawarannahr. The official court historians made no claim that he was descended from Chinggis Khan and during his lifetime Timūr did not make such a claim for himself: he remained content with the title of Emir, not Khan and used the official designation ‘Gurgan’ (son-in-law) to show his connection by marriage with the royal Mongol house. Since he was a child he had dreamt of thrones, crowns and glory, and his diversions were weapons and chess¹. Until the age of 25 he devoted himself to the science of arms, riding, racing and fencing². He was a good horseman and excelled in archery. Timūr had the hardy physique of the nomad, despite his lameness. Perpetual mobility, extremes of desert heat and

¹ Marozzi, Justin. *Tamerlane: Word of Islam, Conqueror of the World*. P.90.

² Manz, Beatrice Forbes. *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*. Cambridge University Press, 1982. P. 4.

lacerating cold, were tolerated by him with an endurance rarely to be found among sedentary peoples. When he visited his capital Samarkand, in between expeditions, without taking residence, he stayed for few days inside the palaces and moved back to the pavilions of his encampment set in the plains beyond the city. Timūr personally led his incessant campaigns³.

Timūr was unlettered, but not ignorant. His mental vitality matched his physical vigour. He was at ease in the company of scholars and mastered the history of his own and other peoples. His envoys were ordered to bring him information about the rulers, the people, the religion, the commerce and the geography of lands as diverse as Spain and China. It is said that Timūr recorded the Asian continent more clearly than any atlas.



Add.7635 (1523) f.136b.

A crier mounted on a mule calling the people of Turshiz to surrender to Timūr. (Inscription: 'On the treasury of compassion the lock is wisdom. The time of our prosperity has arrived')

12.5 X 19 cms

An example of Timūr's tenacity is illustrated by the siege of Turshiz, a fortress in the mountains that was almost inaccessible because of the extraordinary height of its walls and the excessive breadth and depth of its ditches. The first action that Timūr took was to ask the Gouris, men famous

³ Hokhmam, Hilda. *Tamburlane the Conqueror*. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1962.

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for their valour and skill in defending places, to surrender. They decided to continue in rebellion, which obliged Timūr to besiege Turshiz actively. He sent out his order to his soldiers to surround the fortress on all sides and began the attack. Everyday Timūr rode round the place and examined how the engineers raised battering rams and other machines necessary for the siege. The miners drained the ditch and undermined the walls, while Timūr’s warriors assaulted them on every side. The besieged resisted them courageously; but Timūr’s soldiers were receiving every day fresh supplies and orders to ruin the walls, so they almost destroyed the place. The Seditians and Gouris were terrified, lost courage and begged for quarter. Timūr granted them what they asked and encouraged them to leave the town; after having the honour of kissing the imperial carpet, they were enrolled in Timūr’s service and acquitted themselves in a very becoming manner. Timūr, knowing their valour, favoured them with lordships and made them governors of towns and other places on the frontiers of Turkestan.

Endurance and psychological tactics were other of his strengths, as is shown by the besieging of Joseph Sofī during the fourth war in Carezem (1379): the siege continued for three months and sixteen days, causing astonishment, fear, affliction, anger, envy and exhaustion in Joseph Sofī, which eventually made him so sick that he lost his courage and died bewailing his misfortune.

Diplomacy

Timūr conducted sophisticated negotiations with neighbouring and distant powers, as diplomatic archives from England to China bear out. At other times the seeds of victory were sown before an engagement by his agents who moved amongst the ranks of the enemy, and reaped later on the battlefield⁴.

⁴ Hookham Hilda. *Tamburlane the Conqueror*. London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1962. P.6.



BL. Or. 1359- f. 389b

**Soldiers filing before Timūr holding heads of their decapitated enemies which they used to
built the tower of skulls at Baghdad (1401)**

18 X 22 cms

Administration

The Turco-Mongolian heritage owed much of its success to the strength and adaptiveness of steppe traditions developed over centuries of contact with settled cultures. Timūr's great success was based not only on his military prowess but also in his ability to use the administrative style inherited from the rule of Chinggis Khan (1206-27), joined to his astute use and respect of steppe traditions. Timūr, as had Chinggis Khan previously, chose to base his administration on nomad customs and this gave him and his successors independence from the institutions of the settled societies they conquered. On the other hand, the Turkic tribal groups that formed part of his empire learnt to manipulate both steppe and Islamic traditions and institutions. They could constitute themselves as a separate ruling stratum over the subject population, but they had sufficient knowledge of local traditions to rule directly and to participate from the start in Islamic culture. His empire therefore

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had a central organisational tradition which could withstand the even-growing number of settled lands he conquered and even his own political and religious breakdown.

Timūr respected the nomad aristocracy rule of not settling in towns or building fortresses, so as to be less dependent on the tribesmen⁵. Timūr succeeded in gaining the support of the settled population for whom constant strife was disastrous. He showed concern for urban administration and the condition of local agriculture. Merchants, craftsmen and agricultural workers needed the establishment of a state power strong enough to end feudal conflicts. Timūr won the support of these sections and of the Muslim clergy without driving away the many nomad and sedentary lords, begs and princes.

Justice

The justice system was largely established by Timūr, as in the case of Prince Mam Catou, who had wounded Timūr in his right hand with an arrow and who paid with his life when he came to Timūr’s court with presents. At other times a fine was enough as in the case of Timūr Coja Aglen, who had behaved badly ⁶. Luck played a part in the delivery of justice as in the case of the reduction of the fortress of Mardīn when news of the birth of his grandson Ulugh Beg caused him not to make minarets form the heads of the rebels.

The *Zafarnameḥ* emphasises the concept and belief of the period that the wisdom of God had made the good order of the world dependent on the absolute powers He had given to sovereigns to maintain their people in peace. According to Sharaf al-Din ‘Ali Yazdi, there were no better means of doing this than by rendering justice to his subjects, since the wisest of men, Muhammad had said ‘that he preferred the fruits of one hour employed in rendering justice, to sixty or seventy years spent in divine worship’⁷.

Just as he borrowed from the traditions of Chinggis Khan, Timūr dipped freely into the laws of Islam, picking up and retaining those aspects of the faith he found useful, while disregarding those

⁵ Hokhman, Hilda. *Tamerlane the Conqueror*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962. P. 48.

⁶ Sharaf al Dīn ‘Ali Yazdi. *Zafarnāmeḥ*. London: Bartholomew Close, 1723. P. 63.

⁷ Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Al Yazdi. *Zafarnemeh*, London: Bartholomew Close, 1723, P.176.

that were inconvenient. He had no time for instance, for the Prophet's recommendation of a maximum of four wives for a man. Despite a lifetime's wanderings and trotting almost everywhere around Asia, he never found time to honour one of the five pillars of Islam: the pilgrimage to Mecca. He did not shave his head, nor did he wear a turban or the robes prescribed by the faith. Furthermore, as highborn leaders, lowly soldiers, desperate women and innocent children all discovered to their cost, professing the faith of Islam was no guarantee of safety from Timūr's armies⁸.

In spite of Timūr's wars, his subjects called him *the father of the people*. According to the *Zafarnāmeḥ*, they understood that he was obliged like other conquerors to strike terror into all parts and severely to chastise those who resisted him; and therefore his armies were compared to the tempest of heaven, because of the desolation they brought with them⁹.

He governed the state himself without a minister and no one could play the tyrant in his dominion without punishment. Timūr laboured constantly to aid the fine arts, was always admired for his courage and his tenacity in carrying through his plans to the end. To those who served him Timūr was kind¹⁰.

⁸ Manzoni, Justin. *Tamerlane, Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World*. P. 92.

⁹ Sharaf al-Din, 'Ali Yazdi. *Zafārnameḥ*. London: Bartholomew Close, 1723, Vol.1. P. 307.

¹⁰ Marozzi, Justin. *Tamerlane, Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World*. P. 85.

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Economy



Or. 1052 (Indian) f.307a

The *Kuralt'ai* held by Timūr in a magnificent pavilion at Khani Gil near Samarkand (1404)

18 x 25.2 cms

After reading the *Zafarnāme* one can understand how important war was for the economy of Timūr's people. Looting seems to have been a source of income and if looting was successful the inhabitants of his beloved Samarkand would be relieved of taxes sometimes for even up to three years¹¹.

At the peak of Timūr's power, princes of Asia and Europe paid Timūr homage or respects. Across deserts and through mountains caravans journeyed, heavy with plunder, to Samarkand the capital of Timūr's empire. To Samarkand also came the processions of elephants and treasure from the Punjab and the Sultanate of Delhi; the loot of the Volga regions and the Qopchap steppes; the gold tribute of Egypt; florins from Byzantium; tapestries from Castile; master craftsmen from Damascus, scholars from Baghdad; engineers, artists and the clever from every city Timūr conquered; captive

¹¹ Forbes Manz, Beatrice. *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*. Cambridge University Press, 1989. P.13.

Turks from Anatolia, and merchants from the bazaars of the Mediterranean and from China. While Timūr received tribute from most of the known world it should be remembered that the great Timūr had to send his own tribute every year to the Ming Emperors of China.

Unfortunately the *Zafarnāmeḥ* is not strong on trading and finance, although the Spanish ambassador Clavijo in his memoirs recorded the great impression left on him by bazaars and also by the obligation imposed by Timūr on jewellers, tailors, shoemakers, cooks, butchers and bakers and all sort of craftsmen who were inhabitants of Samarkand to display in gala shows and sell their goods at great festivals and *Kurāḷta 'i*.

Women



BL Add.7635 f.102a

Timūr at the celebration for the marriage of Jahangir to Savin Beg Khanzadeh (1374)

12 X 19 cms

The treatment of women was different from the norm of the period. They might be exchanged in marriage with rivals, they might become governesses of children and grandchildren or trophies for

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him or his army, but the women of his tribes were never buried when their husbands died in contrast with China, or sacrificed in the Mongol fashion¹².



Or. 1359 (1552) f.164a

Timūr watching the princes and nobles hunting (*jargeh*) with game being surrounded

17 x 21.5 cms

Hunting formed an integral part of living and was used not only as a way of supplying the nomads with their everyday sustenance, but also as enjoyment for the princes, the army and subjects alike. It was a way of relaxing and celebrating. On several occasions after a conquest of a place, as happened in 1386 after the conquest of Tibilis, Timūr resolved to follow the diversion of hunting: the Emirs received the orders and the soldiers formed the *Nerke*, which activity is to form a big circle surrounding a great space of plains and hills. Later came the *Gerke*, in which these soldiers started enclosing the space, constantly approaching each other in order to corral the stags, deer, lions and other wild beasts. Timur, his sons and other princes of the royal blood, according to the customary rules of chase, would enter the circle and kill many animals as they could. These animals

¹² Paludan, Ann. *Chronicle of the Chinese Emperors*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998. P. 163. When the Ming emperor of China Hongwu (1368-1398) died, a widower, 38 concubines were sacrificed with him, in the Mongol fashion. Jianwen was only 16 years old when he became emperor. He was forced out of China by his uncle and his body never found. *Ibid.* P.163. When Yongle died, his wife and 16 concubines were buried with him. *Ibid.* P. 167.

would be picked up immediately by the soldiers. After the chase, tables were erected for a general banquet to eat the game that had been taken, and to drink the most delicious wines.

Military affairs



Or. 1359 F.240b

Timūr reviewing his troops

18 X 21.8 cms

Religion, magic, dreams, astrology, manipulation and military strategy were all amalgamated in the extraordinary success of Timūr. Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Ali Yazdi is never tired of reminding us that God disposes and that whatever He resolves will come to pass. God, the *Zafarnāmeḥ* says, had ordained the empire of Asia to Timūr and his posterity, because He foresaw the mildness of his government, which would be the means of making his people happy¹³.

Timūr’s supporters related stories about his infant piety and his respect for divines. Islam was already well established in the towns of Mawarannahr and the Barlas clan had also assimilated the faith long before Timūr¹⁴.

¹³ Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Ali Yazdi. *Zafarnāmeḥ*. London: Bartholomew Close, 1723. Vol. 1 P.118.

¹⁴ Hokhmam, Hilda. *Tamerlane, the Conqueror*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962. P.48.

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In 1370, when passing the cleft in the mountains to the south of the Qashka-Darya called *The Iron Gate*, an important Islamic centre, Timūr met Sayyid Baraka, a native of Mecca who claimed descent from Muhammad. This pious man presented Timūr with a standard and a great drum, symbols of royalty and predicted a great future for him. Timūr who respected favourable auguries, let the predictions become widely known and attached the Sayyid to his court together with a number of other religious dignitaries who enjoyed authority in Mawarannahr. Sayyid Baraka became Timūr’s spiritual protector and constant companion¹⁵.

But above all Timūr was a master of military techniques developed by Chinggis Khan. His hordes of elite Tartar troops, privileged and devoted, were the basis of his power. Timūr used every weapon in the military and diplomatic armoury of the day. He never missed an opportunity to exploit the political, economic or military weakness of an adversary. Intrigue and alliance both served his purposes.

The sense that one has after reading the *Zafarnāme* is very well recorded by Clavijo in *Embassy to Tamerlane, 1403-1406*, where he explains that the Tartar army followed Timūr everywhere, every day and all day. There were three kind of captaincies heading one hundred, one thousand or ten thousand men, and over the whole force there was a single commander in chief, who at that time was his nephew Jahan Shāh Mirza. For each war the number of captains called would give Timūr immediately a sense of the size of the army.

The *Zafarnāme* informs us that sometimes 800,000 soldiers were recruited, assembled and mobilised. Marching at the head of his people Timūr accomplished great deeds and gained many victories, since the Tartars were a very valiant folk, fine horsemen, very skilful at shooting with the bow, and exceedingly hardy. If they had plenty of food they ate their fill; but if they only had milk and meat without baked bread, that was enough for them and for a long season they could march without being with their customary speed. They suffered cold and heat and hunger and thirst more patiently than any other people: when food was available they would ate greedily and gluttonously, but when there was scarcity sour milk tempered with boiling water sufficed them.

¹⁵ Hokhmam, Hilda. *Tamerlane the Conqueror*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1962. P. 49.

The Chagatays and Tartars when on the march with Timūr never separated from their women, children, herds and flocks. They all marched with the army when they went to war, migrating from one place to the next. Women who had small children carried them along in little cradles, and as the women rode on horseback, they laid them on the saddle bow, conveniently supported by broad straps that passed round the body of the horse. According to Clavijo, the women appeared to ride comfortably and lightly as if they were freed of the children. The poorer people had to load their families with their tents on their camels.

Apart from physical warfare with catapults, arrows, clubs and fighting men, there was psychological warfare using noise. Kettledrums, great trumpets, cymbals and the din of bells struck great terror into the inhabitants of any place. The *Zafarnāmeḥ* records that in war the noise was so terrible that it seemed as if the day of judgement had come¹⁶.

Many times the results of war were smoothed over in the *Zafarnāmeḥ* with the astrological belief that strange effects came from the providence of God. For instance, the killing of 70,000 inhabitants in Isfahan happened because the negative influence of the celestial conjunction of the two planets, Saturn and Mars, that were at that particular moment in the sign of Cancer¹⁷.

¹⁶ Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī. *Zafarnāmeḥ*. London: Bartholomew Close, 1723. Vol. 1 P.205.

¹⁷ Sharaf al-Dīn ‘Alī Yazdī. *Zafarnāmeḥ*. London: Bartholomew Close, 1723. Vol. 1 P. 293.

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After Timūr



Or. 1359 (1552) 12 f.485a

Death of Timūr (1405)

17 X 22 cms

Timūr represents the culmination of an old tradition: he is the last of the great nomad conquerors. He rose to power within a nomad confederation, whose people formed the backbone of his army throughout his career. However, his conquests are crucially different from those of Chinggis Khan and most other earlier conquerors, since the world he conquered was a known entity almost all of which had been previously ruled by the Mongols. He aspired to rule not over the steppe, but in the Middle Eastern territories such as Iran, Carezem and Afghanistan, where he established

governorships and permanent garrison. His death produced a bitter struggle among his sons and grandsons. What the Timūrid dynasty lacked in political unity it made up for their cultural heritage. His descendants very actively cultivated the charisma of their ancestor as an integral part of their own heritage. They continued to rule within the Islamic tradition, but using and glorifying their Turko-Mongolian culture, using its titles, political institutions and emphasis on dynastic charisma for their own purposes.

Timūr was buried in 1405 in the same mausoleum as his constant companion Sayyid Baraka, with Timūr's face turned towards the Sayyid and to Mecca. The tomb was opened in 1941 by The Soviet Archeological Commission which found the skeleton of a man who, though not fully functioning in both right limbs, must have been of powerful physique, tall for a Tartar, and with an imposing bearing. With these remains they found also bristles of a chestnut moustache.