

Lesson 3

Student Handout 3.1

Whirlwind

Timur, the Lame Conqueror, Lord of all Asia, Scourge of God and Terror of the World!

Although he has been dead for nearly six hundred years and his empire long since gone, the name Timur continues to evoke feelings of both fear and respect in the hearts of people throughout Eurasia. The word Timur is Turkic for “iron,” an appropriate name for one who in his lifetime rose from being the chieftain of a small Turko-Mongol tribe to ruling an empire rivaling that of Alexander the Great.

During his long military career, Timur and his armies crossed Eurasia from Delhi to Moscow, from the Tien Shan Mountains of Central Asia to the Taurus Mountains of Anatolia. From 1370 until his death in 1405, Timur-the-Lame, or Tamerlane, as Europeans called him, engaged in almost constant warfare in order to extend his borders and maintain his vast territory.

Born in 1336 near Samarkand in the Mongol Chagatay Khanate, Timur was said to be tall, strongly built, and well-proportioned in spite of an injury in his twenties which left him with a slight paralysis in his right leg and arm. He always made light of his disability. Ahmad ibn Arabshah, Timur’s biographer, described the conqueror in his sixties him as:

...steadfast in mind and robust in body, brave and fearless, firm as rock. He did not care for jesting or lying; wit and trifling pleased him not; truth, even were it painful, delighted him. . . . He loved bold and valiant soldiers, by whose aid he opened the locks of terror, tore men to pieces like lions, and overturned mountains. He was faultless in strategy, constant in fortune, firm of purpose and truthful in business.

According to the fourteenth century historian Ibn-Khaldun, who met him,

This king Timur is one of the greatest and mightiest kings . . . he is highly intelligent and very perspicacious [shrewd], addicted to debate and argument about what he knows and also about what he does not know!

Timur was a man of curious contradictions. He spoke two or three languages, enjoyed having histories read to him, and supported the arts. While he sacked cities across Eurasia, he took great care to protect teachers and artisans from the carnage and to relocate them to Samarkand, where they might add to the refinement of his capital.

First and foremost, Timur was a ruthless and ambitious warrior who commanded a devoted following. Those who saw his army described it as a huge conglomeration of different peoples. Mongol nomads, settled peoples, Muslims, Christians, Turks, Arabs, and Indians all fought at the conqueror's side.

Around 1371, Timur proclaimed himself ruler of the Chagatay Khanate. Between 1381 and 1405, he and his army swept with whirlwind speed through the Hindu Kush and the Caucasus Mountains, the Persian deserts, the southern Russian steppes, Anatolia, and Syria, sacking cities along the way and slaying their inhabitants. By 1395, Timur had defeated the rival Mongol empire of the Golden Horde. After entering Afghanistan in 1398, his army descended into India, razing ransacking Delhi, the capital of the Islamic Delhi sultanate, and annihilating most of its residents.

In 1400, using war elephants acquired in India, Timur and his troops stormed through the Syrian cities of Aleppo and Damascus, burned down Baghdad, and destroyed the port city of Smyrna in Turkey. In 1402, he succeeded in defeating the Ottoman army and capturing the Ottoman sultan. In the process, Timur unwittingly saved Byzantium temporarily from Ottoman conquest.

Next, Timur made preparations for what was to be his greatest exploit, the conquest of China. In 1368, as he was beginning his rise to power, the Mongol Yuan Dynasty was overthrown and the Ming Dynasty established. Timur was determined to prove that he, not the Ming emperor, was the greatest power in Asia. The Ming government was well aware of the threat and poured resources into the defense of China's western frontiers. Nearing seventy years of age, however, Timur had become infirm and had to be carried on a litter when his army advanced toward China. In 1405, he fell ill and died.

Timur's empire collapsed quickly after his death and the invasion of China never took place. Nevertheless, his exploits had a lasting impact on interregional networks of interaction and exchange from the Mediterranean to China. Southwest Asia, which bore the brunt of Timur's aggression, was slow to recover from the political, social, and economic upheavals brought about by his whirlwind invasions. At the heart of all his conquests was his driving ambition to restore the silk roads to their earlier glory as highways of thriving trade that would enrich his empire as it had the Mongol khans. Ironically, Timur's brutal hegemony shifted the focus of trans-hemispheric commercial interaction from the traditional caravan roads of the Asian heartland to the relatively safe waters of the Indian Ocean.



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