

**“Beginning of Tyranny”:
The Fifteenth-Century Histories of Timur**

Miranda Lenihan

HIST 299: Introduction to the Study of History

Dr. Ferrell

December 7, 2023

I hereby pledge on my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.

Abstract

Timur was the terror of Central Asia from the 1370s to his death in 1405. Despite being known for the blood he spilled, the Islamic world at the time benefited greatly from his patronage of art, architecture, and scholarship. This research examines three fifteenth-century historians—Ibn Arabshah, Ali Yazdi, and Ibn Khaldun—and what influenced their writings about the warlord. Deeply intertwined with the authors' tones and motivations when writing about Timur is the destruction, or lack thereof, of the cities in which the authors resided at the hand of Timur's army. Arabshah's *Tamerlane* and Yazdi's *Zafarnama* have different structures in their research and presentation. These differences are a direct result of Timur's annexation of former Mongol lands and how each historian interacted with his legacy after his death.

In the late fourteenth century, a conqueror arose from the ashes of the former Mongol empire. Timur, known in the West as Tamerlane, was a feared Turko-Mongol from the 1370s to 1405, whose name evokes images of burnt cities and pyramids of skulls. Originally a member of one of many nomadic tribes in Central Asia, his connection to Genghis Khan, which he used to legitimize his rule, was solidified through his conquest of the Mongol successor Chagatai Khanate. After defeating rival Amir Husayn and marrying his widow Saray Mulk Khanam, a princess through Genghis Khan's line, Timur was named the imperial ruler of the Chagataids.¹ Timur then conquered Samarqand in Uzbekistan and began a bloody path through Central Asia. His goal was to create a new Mongol Empire, as evidenced by his takeover of previous Mongol lands and marrying his sons to members of Genghis Khan's dynastic line.² One of his most notoriously bloody sackings occurred when he marched on the city of Damascus in 1401. The entire city, including its great mosques, was destroyed, and "120 stacks of ninety thousand skulls" were erected in the ruins.³

Despite his destructive rule, Timur was also a patron of knowledge and art. His capital of Samarqand was a center of learning and scholarship for the Islamic world. Several notorious theologians and historians studied and published at Timur's court, including Nizam al-Din Shami and al-Jazari, and others from outside the empire, including Ibn Khaldun, visited Timur's capital during his reign. Because of his patronage, many written accounts from his court still exist and are studied today.

¹ Justin Marozzi, *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2004), 418.

² Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 418-19.

³ Marozzi, *Tamerlane*, 420.

After Timur died in 1405, several historians solidified his legacy through writing. Though they used similar sources, including firsthand accounts from servants of the emperor, fifteenth century historians did not cast Timur's personality and rule in the same light. The tone each historian employed when describing Timur is the consequence of their individual background connections to the late emperor as well as their varying motivations for writing about him. In particular, distinctions are clearly made between the motivations of historians who suffered under Timur's reign and those who experienced the growth of the Timurid empire less violently. The authors' backgrounds not only motivated their writing, but completely altered their approach to history.

The first biography of Timur was written by Damascus-born historian Ibn Arabshah. Arabshah was twelve years old when Timur destroyed his home city. He and his mother and sister survived but were taken as captives to the capital, Samarqand.⁴ While what happened to his family is largely unknown, it is heavily implied in an account by Arabshah's colleague and friend, al-Maqrizi, that they were brought into sexual slavery.⁵ Arabshah describes the burning and plunder of Damascus in great detail in his biography of Timur, indicating the traumatic impact it had on his life. The plunder lasted for three days and included the rape and murder of men, women, and children at the hands of Timur's army despite the promise of forty-three days of security.⁶ Arabshah was kept in Samarqand for eight years, although not as a slave.⁷ He was likely sponsored to pursue an education, and, as Samarqand was a center of knowledge and

⁴ R. B. McChesney, introduction to *Tamerlane: The Life of the Great Amir*, by Ahmed Ibn Arabshah, trans. J. H. Sanders, (London: I.B Tauris & Co Press, 2018), xx.

⁵ McChesney, introduction to *Tamerlane*, xxviii.

⁶ Ahmed Ibn Arabshah, *Tamerlane: The Life of the Great Amir*, trans. J. H. Sanders with an introduction by R. B. McChesney (London: I.B Tauris & Co Press, 2018), 157.

⁷ McChesney, introduction to *Tamerlane*, xxi.

education even after Timur's death in 1405, Arabshah may have had the opportunity to study under great scholars before their diaspora in the late 1410s. He was well-traveled, having visited several Mongol and Islamic courts to study under their scholars before settling in Syria in the 1420s.⁸ Arabshah resettled in Damascus and dedicated his career as a historian to "blackening Timur's name forever in the Arabic-reading world."⁹ Arabshah was well-respected for both his rhetorical analysis and his historiography in modern and medieval scholarship. His biography of Timur is his most famous work due to his hatred of the subject matter.

Arabshah's feelings toward Timur are obvious to any reader from just the table of contents. In the first page, Arabshah curses "may Allah remove [Timur] from the garden of paradise."¹⁰ While Timur was also a devout Muslim and his court was a center of theological scholarship, Arabshah compares Timur to a fox and suspects that he was not a true believer.¹¹ The fox motif continues throughout the text, as Timur betrays many of the people he originally follows or puts into power. Timur is portrayed as the bloodthirsty tyrant that he is still known as in the modern world. His soldiers act as extensions of his nature, pillaging and raping wherever they go. Despite the individual actions Arabshah notes, he lays the blame on Timur, claiming that the soldiers are just walking in his footsteps.¹² When Arabshah begins to write about the fall of Damascus, his trauma is more evident, and the reason he is so scathing towards his subject is

⁸ Mustafa Banister, "Squeezing Juice from the 'Fruits of the Caliph's': Tastes, Contexts, and Textual Transplantation at a Fifteenth-Century Egyptian Court," *Interfaces: A Journal of Medieval European Literatures*, no. 9, (2022): 126.

⁹ McChesney, introduction to *Tamerlane*, xix.

¹⁰ Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, 1.

¹¹ Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, 3.

¹² Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, 54.

clear. Timur tended to use the full force of his vast army only on large cities such as Damascus, which was the center of the Islamic world for centuries.¹³ Thousands of people lived and died there when Timur's army ravaged it. Arabshah's description of the battle is brief but graphic. He spares no detail about what Timur's army did to the people of Damascus despite their garrison's surrender, including tearing off the veils of women and raping them.¹⁴ Thousands of citizens, possibly including Arabshah's father, were killed and their homes burned. Despite only being a boy when this occurred, Arabshah recalls the event in great detail decades later. The pain he and his family went through both during the fall of Damascus and later in Samarqand was the main influence for his malicious tone throughout the biography. Unlike most of the other authors who wrote about Timur, Arabshah's connection to the conqueror was the destruction of his home and the enslavement of his family. His biography was authored because he chose to write it, rather than being commissioned. His sole purpose for writing the novel was to blacken Timur's name and ensure that no one overlooked the atrocities his army committed, a stark contrast from most other writings about Timur, which were written by members of the emperor's court or esteemed visitors. Arabshah's most famous work chains him to his own tormentor in perpetuity and martyrs his career to the cause. While he did achieve his goal to bloody the legacy of Timur, Arabshah is not well known outside of this biography and likely never will be.

Zafarnama, one of the most famous historical works in the Arab world, and its author, Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, had an entirely different approach to Timur's legacy. Sharaf al-Din Ali

¹³ Beatrice Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 90.

¹⁴ Arabshah, *Tamerlane*, 160; The act of de-veiling Muslim women could contribute to why Arabshah believes that Timur was not truly Muslim and used the religion for political gain, as it is against Islamic law and the teachings of the Qur'an to violate women in that way. The modesty of women is meant to be a protection against the violence and gaze of men, according to most scholarly interpretations of the original text.

Yazdi was a historian from the city of Yazd, Iran, likely born in the 1370s.¹⁵ His family had a long history of prosperity and power—his ancestor and namesake Sharaf al-Din Ali had a *madrasa* built for him by Rashid al-Din, who was Hulegu Khan’s advisor and one of the most powerful men in the Ilkhanid Empire.¹⁶ Yazdi traveled with and likely studied with Sa’in al-Din Turka, a nobleman who was taken from Isfahan after Timur’s conquest of Iran. Contrasting Arabshah’s experience, nobles and intellectuals were often taken from conquered cities to serve as members of Timur’s court in Samarqand rather than becoming enslaved.¹⁷ Yazdi’s mentor was one of these nobles, though the two left to travel the Islamic world. Yazdi studied as a Persian writer, composing both poetry and histories and later became a beneficiary of Timur’s grandson, Ibrahim-Sultan, when the latter was appointed as governor of Fars. Yazdi was both a member of Ibrahim-Sultan’s court and accompanied his military endeavors. Most of Yazdi’s works came from the time he spent under Ibrahim-Sultan at his court in Shiraz, and his most famous work is the *Zafarnama*, a three-volume historiography of Timur and his genealogy.

The *Zafarnama*’s introduction outlines the reasoning for writing the biography, which is quite different from Arabshah’s passionate hatred. Yazdi was commissioned by Timur’s grandson Ibrahim-Sultan to write about the warlord. Rather than describe Timur as a fox, Yazdi’s preface introduces him as a fair man who only punished those who chose to disobey him.¹⁸ Yazdi also makes note of what sources he used to write the biography, most of which

¹⁵ Ilker Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi and the Islamicate Republic of Letters*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 26; The exact date of his birth is unknown, and scholars have debated if he was born in the 1370s or 1390s. Binbaş presents compelling circumstantial evidence that proves it is improbable for him to have been born later than the 1380s.

¹⁶ Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran*, 29; Madrasas are Islamic universities, usually for a specific branch of theological law, that often included a grand mosque.

¹⁷ Jean Aubin, “Comment Tamerlan Prenait les Villes,” *Studia Islamica* 19, no. 19, (1963), 104-5.

¹⁸ Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi, *The History of Timur-Bec: Known by the name Tamerlain the Great; Emperor of the Mongols and Tartars*, trans. Petis de la Croix, (London: 1723), xxv.

were documents Timur ordered various slaves and servants of his cabinets to write about his achievements.¹⁹ These sources are more than likely favorable towards Timur, as he ordered them to be written, and those who wrote them were likely punished if he did not like what was written down. While Arabshah believes that Timur only used Islam to justify his rule, Yazdi states that he is a pious man. The structural differences of the two accounts also emphasize the drastically different attitudes towards Timur. Arabshah primarily chronicles Timur's conquests and the trail of blood left behind him; Yazdi begins by recounting the greatness of the Mongol Empire, connecting Timur's bloodline to Genghis Khan to provide yet another justification for his lineage's rule over the Mongol successor states. Even while describing Timur's expeditions, Yazdi prefaces each one with a justification for why each area was conquered.²⁰ Even the capture of his own home city of Yazd is regarded as being better for the people. Yazdi describes the siege as Timur punishing the rebels who would not submit to his rule. Thousands of people were dying from famine caused by the fight, yet Timur "pardon[ed] the inhabitants, because he knew they were not concern[ed] in the sedition."²¹ After the submission of the rebels, the city allegedly flourished under Timur's rule due to the "good conduct" of the troops he left there.²²

Yazdi's description of the deaths of his people and the siege of his home city is a stark contrast to Arabshah's recount of the fall of Damascus. While the death and exploitation of Islam at the hands of Timur's army is the central focus for Arabshah, Yazdi glosses over the starvation of "thirty-thousand persons" and puts the blame on the rebels who, as he implies, forced Timur

¹⁹ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, xxix.

²⁰ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 6.

²¹ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 524.

²² Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 525.

to cause such a famine.²³ Yazd, while a large city, was not nearly as big as Damascus or Isfahan, which were annexed at around the same time. Yazd surrendered to Timur, other than the rebels Yazdi blames, and had a puppet governor established rather quickly.

Yazdi's glorification of the man who killed so many is a direct result of his relationship with Timur's grandson Ibrahim-Sultan, the commissioner of the work. Yazdi would likely have been punished if he wrote negatively about his patron's grandfather, regardless of his personal views. Yazdi also did not experience firsthand the same horrors as Arabshah did, though they were around the same age when their cities fell. Unlike the sacking of Damascus and the nearby sieges of Isfahan and Tabriz, most of the deaths in Yazd occurred as a result of starvation rather than direct bloodshed. Famine is certainly traumatic, but Yazdi's rich family, who had many connections to Mongol successor states, may not have seen much of it. And though Yazdi was certainly at Samarqand several times during his life, there is no evidence to suggest that he was taken there forcibly after Fars was annexed into the Timurid empire. Arabshah, on the other hand, not only witnessed the brutal death of thousands of people and the burning of his city, but was also taken as a hostage to Samarqand with his family and was not later commissioned to conceal his experiences in a veneer of dedication to the late emperor, as Yazdi was.

While both Yazdi and Arabshah devoted years of their lives to telling Timur's story, albeit for different reasons, one of the most famous historians in the Arabic-speaking world met the man himself and yet wrote little about him. Ibn Khaldun's interview of Timur is barely a footnote in much of the historiography about the emperor, despite Khaldun being so well-known and meeting Timur personally.

²³ Yazdi, *History of Timur-Bec*, 524.

Ibn Khaldun was already renowned in the Arab world by the time he met with Timur. Khaldun had published many of his famous works out of Cairo, but was present in Damascus during Timur's siege in 1401. Timur called for Khaldun personally, which "strongly appealed to [his] vanity."²⁴ Khaldun was one of the people who backed the proposed terms of surrender of the city; he met with the emperor not only out of personal curiosity, but also out of fear that those who disagreed with surrendering may have sought to kill him over it. Timur kissed Khaldun's hand during their initial meeting and allowed Khaldun to bring him a customary gift afterwards, since the historian had left Damascus to meet him so quickly and had no time to prepare one.²⁵ The two developed an extremely close relationship, documented by both. Khaldun chronicled meeting with Timur during their stays in Damascus several times in his autobiography, *Ta'rif*, though he never wrote any work specifically about the conqueror. He also more than likely knew about what happened in Damascus – the events that led to Arabshah's lifelong animosity towards Timur and his army. Even so, Khaldun described Timur favorably in *Ta'rif* and a few of his other works until his death in 1406. Other historians also knew of their relationship, as evidenced by his meetings with Timur being mentioned in biographies about Khaldun.

Khaldun's close relationship with Timur may have been the reason he never wrote in detail about the conqueror—he had no reason to. Yazdi wrote the *Zafarnama* because he was commissioned by Timur's grandson. Arabshah wrote his biography out of a need for revenge after witnessing the atrocities committed in Damascus. Khaldun was already successful long before meeting Timur; he revolutionized historical research in the Islamic world and was nearing the end of his life by the time they met in 1401. Ibn Khaldun had nothing to gain from writing

²⁴ Walter J. Fischel, *Ibn Khaldun in Egypt*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 45.

²⁵ Fischel, *Ibn Khaldun in Egypt*, 45.

about Timur other than Timur's favor, which he already had. Their relationship was brief, but their connection was significant enough to be noted by Khaldun himself and authors of works about him. The fact that Timur invited Khaldun to a meeting during his siege of Damascus displays the respect Timur had for him even before they officially met.²⁶ Timur accepted the terms of surrender pushed in part by Khaldun, although in practice his soldiers did not respect the agreed upon days of ceasefire before pillaging. Khaldun's close relationship with Timur and pre-existing fame provided no motivation for the historian to produce a work dedicated solely to Timur. Yazdi and Arabshah, however, having less fame and ample motivation, made names for themselves through their biographies about Timur. The means by which fifteenth century historians were connected to Timur and his lineage not only affected their tone when writing historical accounts, but the decision to author their works in the first place.

Ibn Arabshah, Ali Yazdi, and Ibn Khaldun, despite all having similar historical training as Persianate historians, had drastically different upbringings. While Ibn Khaldun was nearly seventy years old when he met Timur during the invasion of Damascus, Ali Yazdi and Ibn Arabshah were about the same age at the time, yet had very different lives under the Timurids. Arabshah watched as his city was pillaged and burned to the ground, his sister and mother taken for the pleasure of soldiers. Ali Yazdi lived a life of luxury and traveled the world with a well-known historian. Both wrote lengthy biographies on the warlord Amir Timur containing similar information with drastically different presentations. The backgrounds of these different authors not only caused them to write, or not to write in Ibn Khaldun's case, about Timur, but also their approaches to the study of history. Arabshah and Yazdi's works are staples in the study of Timurid history and provide important, if clouded, perspectives of their emperor and his legacy.

²⁶ Fischel, *Ibn Khaldun in Egypt*, 45.

Arabshah and Yazdi provide ample evidence that while a historical work may contain critical information, there are many biases that affect the presentation of that information.

Works Cited

- Aubin, Jean. "Comment Tamerlan Prenait les Villes." *Studia Islamica* 19, no. 19 (1963): 83–122.
- Banister, Mustafa. "Squeezing Juice from the 'Fruits of the Caliphs:,' Tastes, Contexts, and Textual Transplantation at a Fifteenth-Century Egyptian Court." *Interfaces (Milano)*, no. 9 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.54103/interfaces-09-07>.
- Binbaş, İlker Evrim. "The Histories of Sharaf al-Din Ali Yazdi: A Formal Analysis." *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 65, no. 4 (2012): 391–417. <https://doi.org/10.1556/AOrient.65.2012.4.1>.
- Binbaş, İlker Evrim. *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Fischel, Walter Joseph. *Ibn Khaldūn in Egypt; His Public Functions and His Historical Research, 1382-1406; A Study in Islamic Historiography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.
- Ibn 'Arabshāh, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad. *Tamerlane: The Life of the Great Amir*. Translated by John Herne Sanders. New edition. London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.
- Marozzi, Justin. *Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World*. 1st Da Capo Press ed. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006.