The Timurid Legacy: A Reaffirmation and a Reassessment

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The Timurids have universally been acknowledged by medieval Islamic cultural historians as representing the pinnacle of patronage of the arts and letters, notably poetry, calligraphy, painting and manuscript illumination, as well as architecture. They also patronized entire areas that are just beginning to come to light with new research and that further underscore the important role that this dynasty of Turko-Mongolian origin played in the cultural history of the eastern Islamic world. The entire proceedings of this conference are, in fact, devoted to the “legacy” of the Timurids, the impact of which was entirely out of proportion both to this dynasty’s geographical scope and to the relatively short length of its political rule (certainly when compared with such long-lived dynastic states as those of the Safavids, Ottomans and Mughals).

We might ask ourselves whether the significance of the Timurid legacy results from the intrinsic extraordinariness of the Timurid period or from the extraordinary richness of the sources available to scholars for its study. It may be recalled that Bartol’d, the great historian of medieval Central Asia, had himself observed that the Timurid period suffered not from a dearth of primary sources, but from an excess of them! For my part, I believe that the period was an intrinsically extraordinary one, and we are able to confirm this fact thanks to the many and varied sources that, amazingly, are still being discove-
red or rediscovered, and that impress us with their high level of sophistication. At the same time, it must be admitted that the Timurids did not create something completely new or radically different from their predecessors. Rather, it was in their refinement and seemingly inexhaustible preoccupation with form and the elaboration of existing standard traditions and modal systems that their contribution should be seen to lie. The Timurid period represents the point of culmination of previous developments, a glorious fin-de-siècle flowering of culture and the arts. Court patronage was certainly the basis of it. As Ibn Khaldun had noted back in the fourteenth century, it was the demand created by ruling dynasties for luxury goods, including monumental architecture, that generated improvements in them.

But in the case of the Timurids, it was also something more: a self-consciousness of taste for technical refinement, even virtuosity – which I have called “a taste for the intricate” – that strove continuously to outdo even itself. This self-consciousness found expression in the codification of many areas of the arts. Standard manuals were written on poetic forms (such as the *mo’ammâ*, or enigma, for example), on musical theory (by Jami and ‘Abd al-Qader b. Gheybi al-Hafez al-Maraghi), and on calligraphy (by Soltan ‘Ali Mashhadi). Even designs for architectural ornamentation were codified – the so-called Tashkent (actually Bokharan) and Topkapi scrolls of the geometrical *gereh* and *muqarnas* patterns. This was also a time when something akin to critical editions were made of important “classical” authors: Ferdowsi’s *Shâh-nâma*, done under the direction of Baysonghor Mirza; the *Divân* of Hafez; and the attempt (albeit unsuccessful) to edit the voluminous *Kolleyât* of Amir Khosrow.

By way of reaffirmation, I would like to discuss several examples I have chosen of areas of cultural endeavour that are less well-known than those of literature, painting, and architecture, and that further underscore the importance of the Timurid legacy in Central Asian and Mughal Indian cultural history in particular. It is worth noting that most of these areas are known through works produced not during the Timurid period proper, but either in the immediate post-Timurid period of Safavid rule in Khorasan, or by Timurid émigrés (especially from Safavid Herat) to the Sheybanid Uzbek-controlled centres of Transoxiana (Samarqand, Bokhara, Shahrokiya, and Tashkent). The circumstance of the movement of Timurid émigrés...
primarily to Transoxiana made the Uzbek centres the main inheritors of the Timurid cultural legacy. Expressing a keen interest in it, the Sheybanids sought to emulate the Timurid cultural achievement at their own courts, at the same time using it to legitimate their political rule over Transoxiana. One of the main sources to document graphically their interest in the Timurid legacy is the *Badâye’ al-vaqâye’* by the Herati émigré, Zeyn al-Din Vasefî; another is Hasan Nesari Bokhari’s *Mozakker-e ahbâb* (Remembrancer of Friends)°.

### Equestrian science

Let us look now at one of these little-known areas, namely, equestrian science. We know about its development in the late Timurid period from a work called *Faras-nâma*, which was written for the Sheybanid ruler, ‘Obeydallah Khan I, in Bokhara by the former royal equerry or “master of the horse” (*mirâkhwâr-e khâṣṣ*) of Soltan Hoseyn Bayqara. A manuscript copy of the work exists in the Oriental Institut in Tashkent. To my knowledge, it has never been subjected to scholarly study or even mentioned by scholars working on either the Timurid or Sheybanid periods.

The author, whose name is unfortunately not mentioned in the introduction, which is partially missing, states that he had served Soltan Hoseyn in Herat in his youth, and that his work was based on experience he had gained in the cavalry from the age of twenty until the time of the writing of the work when he was well over sixty (lunar) years old. The work would therefore have been written some time after 918/1512, the start of ‘Obeydallah Khan’s reign. It describes in great detail the art of horsemanship and horse-breeding as practiced at the court of Soltan Hoseyn, who, according to the anonymous author, was himself an expert horseman and archer, and kept horses of all breeds°.

### Agriculture and agricultural management

One of the chief accomplishments of the Timurids in the economic sphere was the highly developed state of agriculture and agricultural science. Evidence of this is provided by the agricultural manual, *Ershâd al-zerâ’a*, completed in 921/1515 in Herat by Qasem b. Yusof Abu Nasri Haravi, and dedicated to the Safavid Shah Esma’il I. It
contains an exhaustive catalogue of crops, including cereals, vegetables, and flowers, which were cultivated in the Herat region during the late Timurid period, as well as of agricultural techniques, including the types of soil, the best times for planting, and the efficacy of various types of fertilizers.

Again, it is noteworthy that this manual was written not for the Timurids, but rather for their political successors in Khorasan – the Safavids. It is a record of the agricultural achievements of the reign of Soltan Hoseyn, presented within the framework of a book of advice for Shah Esma‘il, which exhorts him to follow the same model in order to ensure the political stability of his new state.

Connected with agriculture was another Timurid success story – the transformation of the major endowed foundations (especially the important shrine complexes located at Gazorgah, Mazar-e Sharif, Mashhad, and others) into large-scale agricultural enterprises, run by teams of professional managers, accountants, and financial auditors. It is no coincidence that Qasem b. Yusof, the author of the Ershâd al-zerā‘a, wrote his work at the shrine of ‘Abdallah Ansari at Gazorgah in Herat where he was employed as an agricultural accountant and/or surveyor.

**Garden design**

Also connected with agriculture was an area in which the Timurids clearly surpassed their predecessors – garden design, or, to use a very contemporary-sounding term, landscape architecture. We have copious historical evidence for the existence of monumental gardens in Samarqand under Timur, complete with pavilions and artificial bejewelled trees, as well as for the later Timurid period (some of which were described by Babur, who notably also mentions artificial weeping willows fashioned from strips of gilded leather in Soltan Hoseyn’s garden in Herat).

The abovementioned agricultural manual – Ershâd al-zerā‘a – contains a detailed description of the layout and planting of a chahâr-bâgh, the Persian formal, quadripartite, architectural garden with pool and pavilion, which the author states was based on information provided by his superior, Seyyed Nezam al-Din Amir Soltan Mahmud, who was better known as Mirak-e Seyyed Ghiyas. On the basis of historical and documentary sources, I was able to determine
that this Mirak-e Seyyed Ghiyas was himself a member of an important family of landscape architects, and the chief landscape architect, gardener, and agronomist of Soltan Hoseyn for whom, according to the author of the Ershād al-zerā‘a, he executed every idea “reflected in the mirror of his fertile imagination and burnished by his illuminating mind”\(^\text{11}\).

What is important for this discussion is the impact that the codification of the design of the chahārbāgh had on both Central Asia and India. That impact can be traced directly to Seyyed Mirak’s move first to India, where in 1529 he engaged in construction work at Agra and Dholpur for Babur, who has traditionally been credited with introducing the Timurid tradition of garden design to northern India; and then to Central Asia, where he emigrated sometime after 1530 and constructed a magnificent garden for ‘Obeydallah Khan I in Bokhara, which was important enough to have been mentioned along with the other architectural monuments erected during that ruler’s reign. Even more significant for tracing the Timurid legacy in the area of garden design is the move made around 1559 by Seyyed Mirak’s son, Mohammad (who was known as Seyyed Mohammad-e Mirak), from Bokhara to India, where he became the builder of Homayun’s tomb in Delhi. It has generally been accepted among architectural historians that Homayun’s tomb-garden is the first preserved Mughal garden built according to the “classical” Timurid chahārbāgh pattern\(^\text{12}\).

**Jurisprudence**

No collections of legal decisions or handbooks on Hanafite jurisprudence have, to my knowledge, survived from the late Timurid period. But in this area, too, works written in the early decades of the sixteenth century under the Sheybanids were based to a large extent on Timurid material, thus demonstrating the heavy dependence of Transoxanian legal scholars on decisions made by their Timurid predecessors (in Herat in particular, but also in Samarqand). The best example of this dependence is a manual of shurūt – formalities of notary documents and court decisions covering all aspects of Islamic life (from purchase and sale transactions to rental agreements to divorce) – which was compiled by Nezam al-Din ‘Ali al-Khorezmī al-Kobravi in the early decades of the sixteenth century for Mohammad Sheybani Khan in Samarqand, and which was entitled al-
Javāme’ al-‘Alīya fī al-vaṣāʾeq al-shar‘īya va al-sejellāt al-mar‘īya
(‘Ali’s compendium of [Islamic] legal documents and authoritative
court decisions)13. The value of this work lies in the fact that it has
preserved copies of Timurid legal documents that ‘Ali al-Khorezmi,
an important Transoxanian legal scholar, regarded as precedent-setting,
thus attesting to the sophisticated level of the Timurid judiciary.
Two areas of particular interest are: 1) the transformation of land
from one category to another, and 2) the pious endowment (vaqf).

By way of illustration of the first area, there are documents dating
from 901/1496 which were intended as models for a transaction by
which state land (khāleṣa-yex so ltāni, mamlaka-yey pādshāhi) could be
transformed into private property (melk), that is, privatized. The
individual in question was the Timurid ruler, Soltan Hoseyn himself,
and the transaction involved the sale of parcels of state land by an
attorney acting on Soltan Hoseyn’s behalf, to an third party, and their
subsequent repurchase by Soltan Hoseyn, only this time as private
property. That the Sheybanids actually based themselves on this precursor in their own legal transactions is proven by the existence of
documents in which the same legal laundering procedure was followed by ‘Abd al-’Aziz Khan in 1080-81/1670-71 in order to create an
endowment for two madrasas he built in Bokhara14.

The institution of vaqf was exploited to the maximum by the
Timurids in terms not only of the huge number of endowments they
created, but also of the juridical nuances connected with it that they explored, including the expansion of the role of women as donors.

There are other areas – political theory (as expressed in the works
of akhlāq, or ethics), diplomacy, and medicine15 – that may be discussed, but this would be to belabor the essential point.

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While the Timurid legacy clearly had a profound influence on both
Sheybanids and Mughals, what is striking is the under emphasis of that legacy by historians in the case of Mughal India, and its overemphasis by former Soviet, and now Uzbek national historians at the expense of the Sheybanid Uzbek contribution to the cultural history of Central Asia. I would like to concentrate on the Uzbek insistence on the Timurid legacy, because of the recently achieved independence of Uzbekistan,
and because of the major conferences devoted to Amir Timur and the
The Timurid Legacy has played an important role in the formation of Uzbek national consciousness. Timur has become an Uzbek national symbol; Samarqand and Shahrisabz have become Uzbek national shrines; and Timurid cultural figures such as Soltan Hoseyn Bayqara, Babur, and ‘Ali Shir Nava’i have become the “founders” of modern Uzbek language and literature. The wholesale appropriation of the Timurid legacy was a direct result of Soviet nationalities policies of the 1920’s, which aimed at creating separate national republics in Central Asia by means of a “national territorial delimitation” (nacional’noe razmeževanie), based mainly on ethnolinguistic criteria. They called for a “reevaluation” of the Uzbek cultural and historical heritage, as well as an explanation of Uzbek ethnogenesis (in itself a thorny and contentious issue), on the basis of: a) the territory of the newly created republic, and b) the sedentary populations of that territory, who alone were considered “historical” peoples, while nomadic or “non-progressive” elements were downplayed or ignored altogether.

The rich material culture left behind by the Timurids assured them a prominent place in the reevaluated Uzbek cultural heritage. The literary production at their courts, painting, manuscript illumination, calligraphy, and above all, building activity were all tangible proofs of a longstanding connection with the newly-delimited territory of Uzbekistan, of the Uzbek nation’s “historicity”.

For the objective historian there are real problems with this. Many of the main centres of cultural production – Herat, Balkh, Shiraz, Isfahan – were located not on the territory of Transoxiana (i.e. the future Uzbek republic), but in Iran (particularly in the medieval province of Khorasan). And most of the chief cultural figures were non-Uzbek Turkic or Iranian-speaking peoples who had never even used the term “Uzbek” as a self-designation (but rather, who called themselves Sart or Tajik, Uighur or Chaghatay).

But the building of national consciousness has little to do with history and its reconstruction through painstaking historical research and scientific methodology. It is much more concerned with the construction of a national mythology. I say this without prejudice, and without attaching any value judgement to it – simply as an acknowledgement of a historical reality of a different kind, one no less valid than the reality based on documents, facts, and figures.
While the importance of what British historians working on nationalism have called “the invention of tradition” has been recognized for the construction of national identity\(^{18}\), this highly selective approach to history tends, however, to ignore other important legacies for the construction of an Uzbek national identity, namely, the Sheybanid Uzbek legacy.

We already saw in the discussion of the sample areas in which the Timurids excelled how the Sheybanids became the chief patrons of the artists, craftsmen, scholars, and literati who had emigrated from Timurid Khorasan after its takeover by the Safavid Qezelbash. As such, they should be regarded as the chief continuators of the Timurid cultural achievement, which they sought to emulate at their own courts in Samarqand, Shahrokhia, Tashkent, and especially Bokhara, and which, in some fields of cultural endeavour (such as architectural ornamentation, for example), might otherwise have become lost, not only to modern scholarship, but also to medieval cultural history. So faithfully did the Sheybanids mirror the tastes and activities of Timurid Herat, that the early sixteenth-century historian, Mohammad Heydar, wrote in his \textit{Târikh-e Rashidi} that the Uzbek court at Bokhara reminded him of the days of Soltan Hoseyn\(^{19}\).

In addition, the Sheybanids contributed significantly to the ethnogenetic makeup of the future modern Uzbek nation, for the nomadic Uzbek invasions of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries added large numbers of Turkic and Turko-Mongolian nomads to the population of Transoxiana. In the Soviet explanation of Uzbek ethnogenesis, however, the Uzbek invasions were downplayed, because, from the standpoint of official historiography, the tribes who came into Transoxiana from the Qipchaq steppe under the leadership of Mohammad Sheyban Khan were \textit{nomadic}, and thus deemed unworthy of being the ancestors of the modern Uzbek nation; instead, only the sedentary peoples who had earlier inhabited the territory of what was now the Uzbek SSR could be regarded as the ancestors of the modern Uzbeks\(^{20}\). Thus the official \textit{Istorija Uzbekskoj SSR} (published in 1967):

\begin{quote}
“The Uzbek ethnic group (\textit{narodnost’}) is composed not of the fairly recently arrived nomadic “Uzbeks” of the fifteenth-century Qipchaq Steppe, but of the ancient inhabitants of Soghdiana, Ferghana and Khorezm. From the earliest times they led a settled life and were occupied in cultivating the soil”\(^{21}\)."
\end{quote}
This approach was unfortunate, because not only did it impede research on Sheybanid Uzbek history, but it also prevented the creators of the national myth from capitalizing on the most prestigious feature of the dynastic history of the Sheybanids, which had actually set them above the Timurids in the sphere of medieval Central Asian politics: their undisputed Chingizid descent.

Uzbek histories written in the post-Soviet period have done much to correct the perception that the Sheybanids were “crude nomads” whose cultural contributions to the life of Central Asia were minimal or totally eclipsed by those of the Timurids. The *Istorija narodov Uzbekistana*, published in Tashkent in 1993, noted the contribution of the Sheybanids as continuators of Timurid traditions, although it ignored the role of Iranian émigrés in that process. So too, and in greater detail, did the *Istorija Uzbekistana*, the relevant volume of which was published in the same year.

To summarize, the influence of the Timurids was wide-reaching and irrefutable, and their legacy is secure. If it has been appropriated by subsequent generations of Central Asians, this is understandable. But, to set the record straight, it would be highly desirable to see the family sarcophagus of the Sheybanids, which used to be housed in the madrassa built by Mohammad Sheyban Khan in Samarqand, and which now stands neglected near Registan Square, rightfully restored as a historic monument, and as testimony to the legacy of the Sheybanid Uzbeks as inheritors and continuators of the Timurid cultural achievement.

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NOTES

3. For the manuals on *mo’ammâ* by Mir Hoseyn Mo’amma’i, Seyfi Bokhara’i, and others, see Subtelny, “A Taste for the Intricate”, p. 75-78. For Jami’s treatise on


6. Ms. IO Tashkent, No. 6735/I, f. 1b-2a. This is an incomplete, late eighteenth-century copy, with the beginning and end missing. For a description, see *Sobranie vostochnyh rukopisej Akademii Nauk Uzbekskoj SSR*, vol. 11, Tashkent, 1987, p. 138, No. 7141.


13. Ms. IO Tashkent, No 9138.

14. Ms. IO Tashkent, No 507. For a discussion of these documents see O. D. Chehovich, “K probleme zemel’noj sobstvennosti v feodal’noj Srednej Azii”, *Obshchestvennye nauki v Uzbekistane* 11 (1976), p. 41 (although she states incorrectly that the document is found in the Central State Archive in Tashkent); and
most recently, in an unpublished paper, G. A. Džuraeva, “Dokumental’noe nasledie Uzbekistana (Vakfname Instituta Vostokovedenija AN RUz)”.

15. The akhlâq works included treatises on the art of statecraft. The culminating point of this genre was the Akhlâq-e Mohseni, which was written by Hoseyn Va’ez-e Kashefi for Soltan Hoseyn’s son, Mohsen Mirza, in 907/1501. It subsequently achieved great popularity in Muslim India. Hoseyn Va’ez-e Kashefi was also the author of an important epistolary manual, Makhzan al-enshâ’, composed in 907 H. as well, and dedicated to Soltan Hoseyn and ‘Ali Shir Nava’i – see Hoseyn Vâ’ez-e Kashefi, Makhzan al-enshâ’, Ms. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ancien fonds persan 73; for a description of the manuscript, see F. Richard, Catalogue des manuscrits persans, vol. 1: Ancien fonds, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, 1989, p. 101.


17. The appropriation of the Timurid legacy by the Uzbeks may be compared and contrasted with the claim to the legacy of the Scythians (who had inhabited the Black Sea steppe region in approximately the fifth century BC), by Soviet Ukrainian historiography, mainly because that legacy included the world famous “Scythian gold” artifacts (unearthed by archaeologists in southern Ukraine from the Scythians’ funeral mounds), while at the same time totally ignoring other groups, such as the Alans, Avars and Qipchaqs, who had also inhabited the same territory at different times, but who did not leave behind a similar tangible cultural legacy. Never mind that the Scythians were not Slavs, but Iranian nomads, and that the artifacts themselves were produced by Greek craftsmen. The important thing is that they were found on the territory of present-day Ukraine. Even the nomadic background of the Scythians was glossed over, as they were presented in a highly romanticized form, as “noble nomads”.


21. Istorija Uzbekskoj SSR, vol. 1, Tashkent, 1967, p. 501. Thus also the official Narody Srednej Azii i Kazahstana, vol. 1, Moscow 1962, p. 167: “In the historical and ethnographical literature there has for a long time existed the incorrect notion of the direct descent of the Uzbek people from those steppe tribes who moved into Central Asia only at the beginning of the sixteenth century, having conquered it under the leadership of Sheybani Khan”.
