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1395: the first encounter

The European powers and Timur (Tamerlane, r. 1370–1405), negotiated several alliances during the last decade of the Central Asian conqueror’s long military career.1 According to the eastern sources these alliances were confined to Byzantium and the Latin powers, the Ifrans or Ifrans (Franks) as the western Christian powers were called in the Timurid chronicles.2 Up to 1395 the same sources described all Christian powers as enemies, and various Christian peoples were systematically attacked by the conqueror in the period leading up to this date.3 In this preliminary phase the Timurid chronicles mention some Slavonic peoples, the Latin Christians and the Eastern Christians as a whole.4 They showed a confused perception of these regions, all of which were the object of a comprehensive jihad, albeit one that sometimes remained notional. The Armenians and Georgians alone were the target of an actual jihad. The Georgian king Bagrat V was captured and forced to convert to Islam in 788/1386 by Timur;5 as for the Armenians, they fell victim to Timurid incursions in the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia.6

A change of attitude occurred from 1395, the year of Timur’s last campaign against Toqtamish Khan, lord of the Golden Horde. This episode was the final clash in a protracted war begun nine years earlier (787/1386) at the time of Toqtamish’s invasion of Tabriz.7 The conflict of 1395 led to the destruction of all the main towns of the Toqtamish khanate. These included various Italian trading posts on the Volga and Don rivers, above all Saray, Astrakhan and Tana. Timur apparently spared Caffa, despite the fact that its inhabitants were considered allies of Toqtamish from an earlier period. During the siege of Tana (Azov) Timur met with European envoys, who were sent to save the European trading houses (comptoirs) in the town. The envoys failed to achieve their objective, but the occasion was probably the first encounter of significance between Timur and Europeans, although isolated individuals may well have met him just before this date.8

This first approach is described by the Cronaca di Treviso, written by Andrea Redusio de Quiero,9 and completed in 1460. With a few exceptions, this source has been neglected by scholars.10 Redusio reports the description given by Pietro, one of three sons of Giovanni Mioli from Treviso, who together with the Genoese Giovanni
Andrea was an eyewitness to Timur’s capture of Tana. During the approach of Tamerlane to the town, after the destruction of Durhast (across the Golden Horde’s dominions), merchants from Venice, Genoa, Catalonia, Biscay and other countries who sought refuge in the town, held a meeting (constitutum) and finally decided to send Timur one envoy representing each group, carrying presents. The envoys eventually reached Timur’s encampment, which is described as a sort of town made up of tents; in its centre stood Timur’s own pavilion, richly decorated with gold and silk. To reach it the envoys had to traverse three large enclosures (claustra), all of which were guarded by a large number of soldiers. In the third enclosure were the court mistresses, clothed in the Persian way, ‘for the satisfaction of Timur’s sexual lust’. The author of the Cronaca di Trevixo here introduces a description of a large golden tree with golden leaves jingling in the wind, producing a musical effect. Redusio also describes the carpets hung up in the encampment, as well as various precious artefacts in the area that led to the throne hall. After depositing their shoes, cloaks and hats, the envoys prostrated themselves three times in the presence of Timur, exclaiming Ave Rex Regum et Dominus dominantium, a formula designed to evoke the title of Shabqishath (King of Kings), and probably an echo of Timurid protocol. They offered their gifts to Timur, imploring the safety of the ‘Franks’ of the town of Tana and protection for their commercial activities.

According to the Cronaca di Trevixo, Timur was seated between two Franciscan friars. He showed his guests a large basin, with a capacity of five metrica (around 190 litres), made of carbenaculum (a sort of ruby) and full of wine. They had to drink a glass of this to the envoys to drink. Then he enquired of them whether any king or lord of the ‘Franks’ possessed a basin of such size and value. They answered that no western king could boast of such a basin. Timur explained that his basin came from the Persian emperor (Imparator persarum). Timur gave the emissaries permission to return to Tana. With them he sent one of his nobles (proceribus), who feigned affability and showed particular interest in the galleys and other ships, and the goods on sale in the markets, some of which he bought. After his reconnaissance he returned to the court of Timur, who just a few days later assaulted the town and pillaged all the merchandise. Some of the western merchants managed to escape to sea on their galleys, while others were captured and released on payment of a ransom to Timur. The Cronaca di Trevixo also reports the evidence of the Genoese Giovanni Andrea who described a curious episode, which he had probably misunderstood. This was the visit by an obscure ambassador of a ‘great emperor’ (maximi imperatoris), in front of whom Timur allegedly knelt, using assistance to do so due to his lameness.

1395–1399: a change of approach in Timur’s imperial policy

Even if suspect in parts, the account given by Giovanni Andrea attests the presence of some westerners at the court of Timur, men who were able to gain direct access to him. During the years that ensued, the evidence of a western presence at the court of Timur becomes more difficult to demonstrate. It is possible that before the battle of Nicopolis (1396) he had an encounter somewhere with a Frenchman called Jacques du Fay. This individual is mentioned by Jean Froissart in his Chroniques; he was probably an emissary of the French court and later fought at Nicopolis. Certainly other powers showed strong interest in the opportunities that might be offered by the new conqueror, for as early as 1394 the Venetian senate was discussing the opportunity of an approach. The battle of Nicopolis, fought between a western coalition and the Ottoman army on 25 September 1396, ushered in a change in the policy followed by Timur. Failure to bring into being a coalition of the two main leaders of the ghurid against a generic ‘infidel world’, attested by the exchange of letters between Timur and Bayezid, constituted a substantial diplomatic setback for Timur. Later, the Timurid chronicles would develop the theme, claiming that Murad I had proved unable to conquer the Anatolian beylik and unify Turkey, and denouncing the alliance between his successor Bayezid I and Qara Yusaq, the leader of the Turkmen confederation Qara Qoyunlu. They accused Bayezid of supporting the Turks, ‘brigand’ and, implicitly, of rejecting any serious chance of mounting a common jihad. This substantial shift of perspective in Timur’s plans corresponded also with a change of projects, in particular the Indian campaign launched in 1398 represented an ideological response to the western activities of the Ottomans. In fact in this phase (1396–99) a series of vehement accusations of impiety, addressed against Timur, appear in various Ottoman and Persian sources from Anatolia.

The return of Timur to Samarkand in May 1399 was followed by the rebuilding of the town with the erection of the Great Mosque, an architectural enterprise which gave the townsfolk a chance to reconstruct the whole town, in particular its market (1403) and later a number of other buildings. The presence of various Christian captives, but probably also Christian merchants who were interested in this new market for their wares, seems to reflect a change of attitude especially towards the Byzantine court and the Latin powers in the West. In fact the reactivation of western relations started as early as 1398 when the Roman Pope Boniface IX transferred the Franciscan Friar Jean from Nakhcheivan to the Archepiscopate of Sultania. It was only then that Fr. Jean initiated diplomatic activity with the French court. In a well-known work, Sylvestre de Sacy suggested that a meeting took place between Jean and Timur, at which the friar informed Timur of events at Nicopolis. The question of an embassy to Europe then taking place, and comprising Fr. Jean and Fr. Francis Sandron as Timur’s ambassadors, was given consideration by various scholars. The discussion included the important report about Timur that was composed by the archbishop of Sultania. Persan sources refer to a good deal of intelligence work sponsored by Timur in the hope of ascertaining the full extent of his enemies’ military potential, above all in Anatolia. It is possible that this intelligence also informed him about the westerners, in particular the Genoese, who were active in the area.

1400–1401: towards a new pragmatism in relations

France certainly played an important part in the revival of relations with this new ‘Tatar’ power in the East. The role of Marshal John II Le Meingre, known
as Boucicaut, who returned to France in 1397 following his capture at the battle of Nicopolis, proved to be pivotal.24 Boucicaut was the commander of a "micro-crusade" in 1399 to break the Ottoman blockade of Constantinople and to escort Manuel II to France. This period, in particular the months following the nomination of Boucicaut as governor of Genoa (23 March 1401),25 was characterized by the intensification of relations between Genoa and the East. It is not clear how many envoy tried to meet Timur before Boucicaut's Genoese appointment, which brought to a close a troubled seven-year French administration of the Italian town, culminating with the dictatorship of Battista Boccanegra (12 January 1400).

A meeting at Sivas between Timur and a delegation headed by a certain Giuliano Maciocco, or Maiocco, and dated 1400, appears quite obscure. Rather than being a diplomatic mission from Italy, this was likely to have been an independent initiative from Constantinople, one representing the interests of the Venetians and Genoese of that city, and probably including a message from the Byzantine Emperor.26 A Genoese ambassador from Pera may have reached the court of Timur at the beginning of 1401.27 In fact he preceded the sending of two Timurid ambassadors to Constantinople, who arrived at Pera on 19 August 1401, alongside the above mentioned Fr. Francis. According to Giacomino de Orado, as reported by Adam Knobler, "the purpose of the embassy was to dissuade the Greeks from making a treaty with Bayezid, stating that Timur was planning to march against the Ottomans during the autumn."

The background for new and intense diplomatic activities was in place, and in this context we should include not just the political aspirations of the European powers, but also the commercial advantages or disadvantages which might arise through links with this, still mysterious, lord of central Asia. Some merchants, such as Beltrano Mignanelli, were horrified by the Timurid invasion of Syria, as is clear from Mignanelli's long report entitled De Ruina Damascus.28 But others were tantalized by this new market. It was for this reason that Boucicaut, immediately after his appointment as governor of Genoa, began paying a lot of attention to the Genoese agencies. If Pera acted to a large extent in an independent manner, in the cases of Chios and Phocaea, Famagusta, Tana and Caffa there was much more proactive involvement by the French governor. In Chios Boucicaut played an active role in forwarding the reconstruction of the town walls to prevent an Ottoman attack, thereby showing a clear understanding of the island's importance.29 In relation to Tana and Caffa, it is noteworthy that after the dramatic devastation of this area by Timur, the economy seems to have completely revived, probably through a modus vivendi reached with the former invader.30 In the case of Famagusta there is no direct evidence for diplomatic intervention, but an embassy dated 17 October 1402 presented the 'Signoria di Creta' with a request for peace thanks to an officer (luogotenente) of Timur, called Epso, a request which was received by the Venetians.31 Ongoing competition between Venice and Genoa gave further stimulus to this diplomatic activity.

1402: the battle of Ankara

There is no direct evidence of any European contingents taking part in the battle of Ankara, with the exception of Johannes Schildberger, and as far as we know the captured Bavarian exercised no influence on any political decision of Timur.32 Similarly, we lack any detailed information about the Castilian embassy of Payo Gómez de Sotomayor and Hernán Sánchez de Palazuelos, which reached Timur after the battle of Ankara and returned to Spain with an envoy of Timur, Haji Muhammad (Mohamad Alçaji), in 1402.33 But substantial information did reach the West in the immediate aftermath of the battle. For an idea of the extensive reporting about the battle in the West, we can draw on various reports which were later transcribed by Marino Sanudo in his Vitae Ducum Venetorum.34 Also well-known is the reaction of the Genoese of Pera, who apparently raised the standard of Timur over their town.35

The presence of a Byzantine ambassador in Kutahiya during the autumn of 1402 is attested by the Timurid sources, and it demonstrates the immediate reaction of the Emperor and the Latin community of Constantinople to news of the battle. The Zafarnamah, or Liber Victorialis, by Nizam al-Din Shamsî, completed two years after the battle, reports the more authentic Persian version of this embassy: the "king of Istanbul" (malik-i Isberb) informed of Timur's success, sent messengers to him, asking him to accept the submission of the Byzantine Emperor and payment of a tribute.36 The later version of Sharaf al-Din Yezdi (1427-28) enlarges the account with some interesting additions: he notes that the bakšš (governor) of Qustantiniyya (Istanbul), known as takür,37 gave various šarāt (florins), and was honoured by Timur with a number of embroidered cloths.38 Clavijo, who also mentions this embassy, notes that some Genoese irritated Timur by helping the Ottomans to escape across the Dardanelles.39 The Venetians for their part set in train an ambivalent policy, showing particular concern for Gallipoli and recognizing the position of Suleyman Celebi in Europe.40

1403: Chios and Phocaea

It is likely that Timur was disappointed only with the Genoese of Pera and the Byzantine Emperor, in fact during his subsequent advance in Anatolia Timur paid particular attention to the other Genoese settlements in Chios and Phocaea. This was probably a consequence of Boucicaut's policy, for he was more attentive to the Maona (company) of Chios, which was the object of an obscure correspondence in November 1402.41 If the Timurid chronicles place particular emphasis on the capture of the fortress of Smyrna (Izmir), portraying it as a further ghātā against the infidel Franks (i.e. the Knights Hospitaler),42 they employ a completely different tone towards the island of Sükia (Chios) and the town of Fùcha (New Phocaea) on the mainland. During the early months of 1403, Timur sent the prince Muhammad Sultan, son of his deceased second-born son Jahāngir and heir to the Timurid throne, to negotiate the ransom for Phocaea. Later the lord of Chios sent other envoys to the court of Timur to negotiate about his own maona. These
two episodes are widely reported by the Persian, Greek and Latin chronicles, and a careful reading of events reveals the revival of a previous agreement between Timur and certain Genoese agents. The Timurid sources describe Muhammad Sultan’s encampment in front of Phocaea, together with the submission of the lord of the town who agreed to the payment of the jizya (capitation tax). The lord of Phocaea is here generally described as a nāvāšt-i nāmdār (renowned lord). When Muhammad Sultan was on his way back to Manisa, where Timur was camped, a French king (sok az Malik-i [franj]) whose name was S.T.H. (or Sata), from the island of Stagza (Chios) reached the encampment with a request for clemency for his island, and a declaration of submission to Timur, accompanied by the payment of the jizya and kharaj (tribute). The three Arabic letters used for the name of the lord of Chios presented a puzzling problem to the copyists and editors of the Persian sources, who transcribed them in various ways. In fact they seem to correspond to a truncated transcription of the word (Battista, which is the name of the governor of the muqta until 1404). Battista Adorno. Yazdi notes in his description the fact that Chios was famous for the production of mastic, but this addition is clearly a later one, inserted by the author to flatter his own encyclopaedic culture. Though some modern historians describe the submission of Chios as a capitulation provoked by the terror that Timur produced, contemporary Greek sources, in particular Dukas, describe the meeting between Muhammad Sultan and the Genoese of Phocaea as particularly friendly.

1404: Clavijo and the end of European relations with Timur

The departure of Timur from Anatolia is attested by several European sources, which introduced a long series of more or less realistic episodes relating above all to the imprisonment of Bayezid in a cage, and his death on 8 March 1403. Soon after the battle of Ankara the Genoese and Venetians regained their previous status as allies of the Ottomans, and the disenchantment of the western powers in general was immediate; the death of Bayezid would underline this, adopting a fatalistic approach to the figure of Timur. One significant exception was the embassy of Clavijo, which reached Samarqand in September–October. The political outcomes of the embassy were minimal, but it occasioned one of the deeper and more substantial western accounts of Timur’s life and deeds. Clavijo was witness to the last great qurilay (general assembly) which Timur held in Samarqand, on 8 September 1404, before his departure for China. In the course of this assembly Timur received the ambassadors representing the bilād-i franj (the Frankish countries), which he considered solid allies. The Persian account of this meeting by Sharaif al-Din ‘Ali Yazdi is confirmed by Clavijo himself who describes the diplomatic ritual, including the delivery of presents, and followed by the same practices on the part of the ambassador from Mamluk Egypt. Here the westerners encountered the ambassador whom Timur had earlier despatched to Spain; he was clothed in the Castilian manner, which amused the participants. Clavijo describes the enthusiastic reception of the western embassy, underlying the fact that they were explicitly invited to take seats in a higher position than the Chinese ambassador, because the king of Castile was considered by Timur as a son, whereas the Chinese Emperor was called tangās (tangār), ‘pig’ on the grounds that he refused to pay tribute to Timur. After the exchange of presents and a brief speech by Timur, more detailed discussion was deferred to another time. Nevertheless, over the course of several weeks Timur invited the Castilian envoys to participate in an impressive sequence of banquets and parties, and Clavijo describes the bouts of heavy drinking engaged in by the ‘Chagataids’ including Timur himself. Finally, without any further private audience or official letters to the king of Castile, the ambassadors were forced to leave Samarqand for their home on 21 November 1404. Clavijo’s embassy may be taken as typical of the evanescent character of Timur’s interest in the Latin West. The sole exception might be the attention he directed towards the Byzantines, Genoese and Venetians, all of whom Timur explicitly warned not to form a treaty of friendship with Bayezid. It is hard to detect in Timur’s strategies any clear continuity with the intensive Mongol (particularly Ilkhanid) interest in fostering relations with the West. That said, some echoes of these events, including a deliberate confusion between the two periods, can be seen in the late Timurid falsification of the so called Letters of Rashid al-Din, as Andrew H. Morton has convincingly argued. In later eastern sources Timur’s western agreements were reduced to a generic mention of ‘Frankish’ involvement, above all during the Anatolian campaigns.

More interesting is the narrative of the deeds of Timur which appeared in European sources of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They represent a more magnum of details, in which the progressive myth-creation of humanist culture put to imaginative use various stories of Timurid encounters with the West. On the one hand, in the early-fifteenth century Poggio Bracciolini’s extrapolation of Timur from the account by Mignanelli gave rise to a substantial popularization of Timur, who around 1430 was also portrayed in the lost Palazzo Orsini in Rome. It was most likely this portrait of Timur that later inspired Machiavelli in his work. The Prince. On the other hand, the figure of a Genoese who was the personal counsellor of Timur appeared early in the sixteenth century in Spain, Italy and France. In some French books of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries this individual acquires the fantastic name of Axalla. Far removed from any historical reality, these figures were the last evidence of an earlier attempt to establish a contrast to the Ottoman Empire. The synthesis of the titanic figure of the ‘hyperborean’ Central Asian king with an exaggerated European presence at his court, thus gave rise to a considerable theatrical and artistic tradition.

Notes

1 The nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century perspective on relations between Timur and the West may be summarized by two studies: Joseph Delaville-Le Roux, La France en Orient: expéditions du Maréchal Boucicaut, 2 vols (Paris, 1886); Marie Mathilde Alexandre-Dersi, La campagne de Timur en Anatolie (Bucharest 19-2, with some additions in the London reprint of 1977). This research has been substantially developed in recent times. See in particular Adam Knaobl, The Rise of Timur and Western
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13 Could these be the Franciscans of Astrakan or Tana mentioned by Golubovich? See below, and Thomas Tanase, ‘Jusqu’aux limites du monde. La papauté et la mission franciscaine, de l’Asie de Marco Polo à l’Amérique de Christophe Colomb (Rome, 2013), 661.

14 The second could be to Sultán Ahmad Jalayir, the lord of Tabriz and Bighbadh, or to one of the Mughal lords of Fars, all of whom were defeated by Timur on various occasions during the years 1381–93.


17 The activity of other French in the East in this period, in particular at the Ottoman court, is well described by Philippe Girardet in his ‘Jacques de Felic, figure de l’entre-deux cultural au ledenmaï de la défaite de Nicopolis’, Études Revue de Etudes Bizantines y Neogriegos 24 (2003), 111–24.


20 Togon, Timur’s Oustropoapolitik, 279–98.


24 Clavijo, Historia del Gran Tamerlan, 220, describes 150,000 Christian deportees in Samarqand in 1403.


26 See the very useful references in Thomas Tanase, Jusqu’aux limites du monde, 665. See also Knobler, ‘The Rise of Timur’, 342. The observations concerning the letters written by Timur to Charles VI, by Abdallah Soudavar, ‘The Concept of “al-qamâm asbab” and “yaqīn-e sâyeh”’, and the Problem of Semi-fakes’, Studia Iranica 28 (1999), 255–73, are unhelpful for the understanding of the range of activity of these two French friars. Soudavar’s observations are confined to the character of the letter and the protocol used, and we have no other examples of letters sent to Christian courts. Alexandre-Descour, La campagne de Timur, 39, mentions the use of Fr. François in 1394 by Manuel II as envoy to no other court of Timur, but there is no evidence on this point.


30 Ibid., Jean II Le Meingret, 96–105.

52; Roberto S. Lopez, Storia delle colonie genovesi nel Mediterraneo, 2a edn (Genoa, 1996), 305.
36 Balard, La Romane génoise, 2:687.
38 Johannes Schilthberger, The Bondage and Travels of Johann Schilthberger, ed. J. Buchanan Telfer (London, 1879), 20–21. Timurid sources depicted the clash with Serbs serving in the army of Bayezid as an act of ghazāl between the ‘lord of Iran and Turan’ and the Qoyunlu Rīvāt (Bayezid) and his Ibrāhīmī army (the Serbs): Yezdi, Zafarnāma, 2: 307–14. Jackson mentions another knight who was involved in the battle, the Hungarian Nicolau Gerecze: The Mongols and the West, 245.
39 Clavijo, Historia del Gran Tamerlán, 17–18.
40 Marco Sanudo, in IIS, III (1733), 204–8.
42 Malani, Zafarnāma, 1:264–5.
45 Ruy González de Clavijo, Embajada a Tamerlán, ed. Francisco López Estrada (Madrid, 1943), 111–12.
47 Philip P. Argenti, The Occupation of Chios by the Genoese and their Administration of the Island 1346–1556, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1958), 1:154–5. The content of this letter of Boeckast has not survived, but it is possible to suppose that Boeckast tried to play down the conflicts between Chios and New Phocaea in view of an agreement with Timur.
48 Yezdi, Zafarnāma, 2:336–42.

Timur and the ‘Frankish’ powers

51 Probably was a descendant of...