



Geoffrey Goddard
Résumés de thèse en anglais et en français pour l'UFA
le 22 août 2023

From Encounter to Myth: Representing and Mobilizing Knowledge of Tamerlane in
Fifteenth-Century Latin Europe

Introduction

In the late sixteenth century, the Turco-Mongol emir Tamerlane, or Timur (c. 1330-1405), was in vogue in European intellectual circles. There is no better illustration of this enthusiasm than the appearance on the London stage in 1588 of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. In France, a group of French historians seeking to justify their belief in an inevitable human progress also became captivated by Timur. For one of these authors, Loys Le Roy, there was no better example of "modern" virtue than that of Tamerlane, whose great military discipline and startling geopolitical impact made him the spitting image of all that epitomized his own day and age. When we look to explain Le Roy's enthusiasm, we may first be willing to write this off as mere zeal for an Ottoman antagonist in a century where the Turks were seen as a primary threat to the European political order. However, upon a closer look, Timur's defeat of the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I in 1402 only provides part of an answer. Indeed, these French historians were championing much more than a mere enemy of an enemy, but rather a striking paragon of a kind of individual virtue in its own right.

The question of the development of a European *vita* of Tamerlane over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has attracted significant scholarly attention. However, despite scholars' efforts, there have remained a number of gaps in the research. The most significant of these, in our view, is that there has been little research dedicated to the relationship between diplomacy, eyewitness testimony, and the birth of this secondhand tradition. Rather, the tendency has been to focus on one of these three groups of sources. One explanation for this lack of synthesis is that each of these groups of sources has become the domain of specialists. Western diplomacy with the Mongols is now almost its own established field; studies on travelogues are often devoted to a single author, and the transmission of secondhand knowledge has been the privileged domain of intellectual and art historians. Modern scholarship on Timur thus appears to some extent as a patchwork, whereas no quilt has been made that brings these all together.

In order to explain sixteenth-century Western enthusiasm for Timur, we have focused on four questions: what characterized western "representations" of Timur? What were the larger polemics in which authors "mobilized" knowledge of him? What were the original "encounters" upon which Western knowledge of Timur was based? What was the scale upon which these works were diffused? For our study, we have reexamined as much of the known European diplomatic material on Timur as possible, looking at a total of roughly 70 mostly Latin texts and works of art produced in Europe over the course of the fifteenth century. Our study is divided into three parts, which correspond both to chronological periods and stages of diffusion of knowledge. Part one is devoted to the period of direct diplomatic contact between Western

parties and Timur between 1394 and 1407. This section examines both the reasons why Western parties made contact, as well as initial images of Timur in commercial and diplomatic reports. Part two is dedicated to the half-century of continued transmission of eyewitness knowledge about Timur after his death in 1405. Part three focuses on the period of secondhand transmission of knowledge of Timur between roughly 1450 and 1510. An appendix with a bibliography of around 90 largely unstudied sixteenth-century works on Timur is also included in the thesis.

Part One

Part one of this dissertation is divided into three chapters. Chapter one presents views of modern scholarship on Timur's career, intentions, and propaganda so as to offer a point of departure for the study of Western representations of him. Chapter two focuses on contact between Timur and Eastern Mediterranean states, especially Genoa, Venice and Byzantium. Chapter three examines two diplomatic missions by Johannes of Sultaniyya and Ruy Gonz  les de Clavijo to consider how politics in Western Europe, specifically Aragon, Castille, France, England, and the Teutonic Knights, saw Timur. In the conclusions to part one, we offer a quantitative and qualitative analysis of Western diplomatic contacts with Timur. Between 1394 and 1407, Western parties sent a total of 29 embassies to Timur or his third son Miranshah. These are presented in a chronological table. Among these contacts, Genoa's colonial empire, under French governance during this period, held by far the dominant position with 18 embassies to Timur. Compared with the four Venetian embassies, this number is remarkable. We may explain Genoese preponderance by their aggressive commercial policy and their disproportionate commercial interest in trade in the Black Sea over that in Mamluk domains. Moreover, almost a quarter – 7 total – of Western embassies travelled by way of Dominican emissaries, whose coloring of commercial and military embassies with religious messages shaped communication. Qualitatively, Western parties sought contact with Timur for three primary reasons: commerce, military alliance, and political obligations in the form of paying tribute.

Part Two

Part two is separated into five chapters. In chapter four, we look at historiographical reactions to Johannes of Sultaniyya's 1402 mission and corollary visions of Timur as a Prester John figure. In chapter five, we examine the spread of representations of Timur as a *vir illustris* in Church circles in Constance, Siena, and Rome. In chapter six, we consider the experience and intentions of six travel-authors who wrote about Timur. In chapter seven, we compare historiographical visions of Timur in Genoa and Venice in light of their diplomatic record. In chapter eight, we probe the influence of the Council of Ferrara-Florence in the production of knowledge about Timur. In the conclusions to part two, we overview 22 of the 36 works studied in this section which lie closest to eyewitness testimony. We supply a chart which displays the filiation of knowledge and manuscript and printed diffusion of these works. Overall, we may identify a reliance on ten groups of firsthand witnesses of Timur, made up of captives, local inhabitants, diplomats, and government officials and archives. We consider the various reasons why authors wrote about Timur and distinguish five main polemics into which they inserted him: the crusade, the mission, commerce, cultural debates, and Church unity. We then consider three contexts which promoted the transmission of this knowledge: ecclesiastical councils and circles, local government, and acts of personal solicitation. Overall, the works studied in this section show how the polyvalent interests in Timur identified in part one continue to surface in works from the first half of the fifteenth century in Europe.

Part Three

The three chapters in part three are each devoted to a particular context of production of indirect testimony about Timur. Chapter nine focuses on the aftermath of the Fall of Constantinople, in which humanist authors constructed a fable of Timur as a defender of the city and employed this in arguments about the crusade. Chapter ten examines how during the First Venetian-Ottoman War from 1463 to 1479, Latin authors used Timur as a model to conceptualize a new encounter with the Türkmen ruler Uzun Hasan. Chapter eleven centers on how a “myth” of Timur as a divine instrument became commonplace in the world-chronicle tradition by the end of the century. In the conclusions to part three, we analyze a total of 29 texts by 25 authors concerning Timur produced over this period. These are presented in a table that quantifies their diffusion in manuscript and printed works and shows the sources used by each author. Compared with earlier periods, there is less geographical variety in writings about Timur from the second half of the fifteenth century. While Timur appears in vernacular works across Europe before 1450, after this date Timur becomes a Latin phenomenon in Italy. There, a “myth” of Timur as a divine instrument is fashioned that is then exported across Europe in the final decades of the fifteenth century through the medium of the illustrated world-chronicle. While new reports of “Eastern” (Balkan, Greek, Ottoman, and Türkmen) provenance on Timur continued to surface in Europe over this period, writings about Timur in the world-chronicle tradition were generally impervious to their use. This remained the case until the first decade of the sixteenth century, when two Latin authors incorporated Serbian, Greek, and Türkmen testimony to modify a canonical vision of Timur.

New Contributions

For each of the periods in question, my research has led to both the uncovering of new source material and an enlarged understanding of how knowledge was transmitted. For the diplomatic context, we may highlight the contribution of our study to Venetian visions of Timur, as well as those of Trebizond. Our research helps clarify Venetian reticence to ally with Timur and the comparatively dark portrait of Timur that surfaced in Venetian historiography as compared with that of Genoa. As Venetian historiography was particularly important for the development of a canonical vision of Timur in the late fifteenth-century world-chronicle tradition, this research is significant in explaining the encounter behind the myth. Also for the diplomatic period, my study of commercial and official reports has also helped us paint a clearer picture of how knowledge of Timur’s invasion of Syria and victory at Ankara traveled west through a series of hubs of transmission.

For the periods of transmission of first- and second-hand knowledge of Timur, I have also identified a number of unknown manuscripts and unstudied works. However, in these sections, my most important contribution is to offer a new synthesis of works on Timur and their sources. We are now able to speak of roughly ten groups of eyewitnesses and around twenty texts directly based upon these. This result should defer the easy conclusion that Western visions of Timur were always a matter of second-hand knowledge and thus essentially speculation. My research should help anchor these in the diplomatic and historiographic context and show how Western enthusiasm for Timur evolved out of a prolonged process. Part three of my study enables us to follow this process in works based on secondhand testimony. One particular contribution for this period is that I have been able to show the persisting influence of “Eastern” knowledge on Latin visions of Timur. As a whole, my study offers a comprehensive overview of how Western visions of Timur evolved from an encounter into a myth.