

Conquest and decline of Timurids



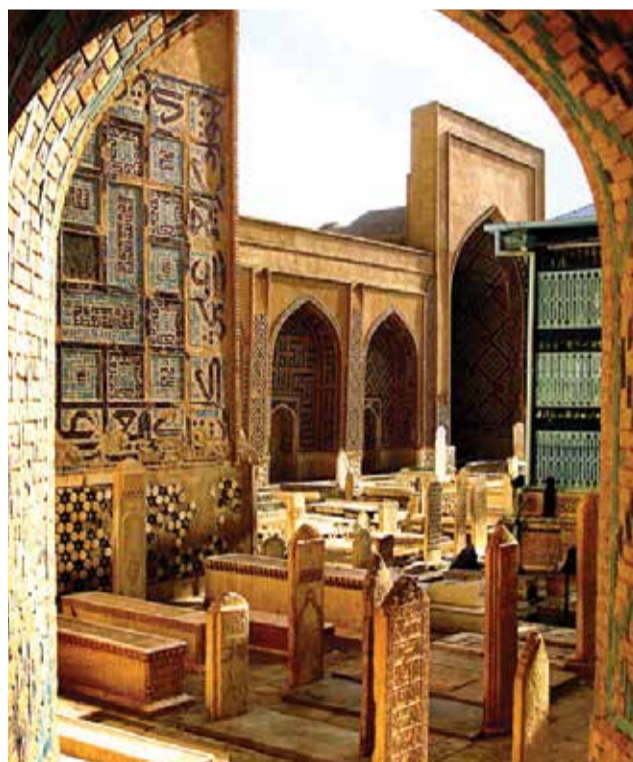
The citadel of Herat, Afghanistan restored and embellished by Shahrugh in 1415-16

Like the Ilkhanids and Saljuks before them, the Timurids illustrate the truth of Ibn Khaldun's (an Arab sociologist, philosopher, and historian) dictum that states follow a three-fold trajectory whereby a powerful personality establishes a dynasty, a successor monarch consolidates that achievement and a later ruler presides over its decline. The predominant figure of that dynasty is Timur (1336-1405 CE), also known as Timur-e Lang, Tamerlane or Tamburlaine (literally 'lame [man of] iron'). His career has remarkable parallels to that of Genghis Khan —from whom he claimed descent through his mother, as he himself told Ibn Khaldun in person — but without the panoramic vision of Genghis himself. Timur too rose to power first by gaining control of his own tribe, the Barlas, and then, by means of strategic political and kin alliances, steadily building a confederation of numerous tribes with himself as its supreme head. By 1370 he had become the major power in Transoxania with an army of perhaps 200,000 men, organised on a decimal system and relying on mounted archers supported by siege engineers.

He spent most of his life campaigning at the head of his army and relied on his personal prowess as a military leader without the need for any supporting institution — political, civil or military.

He was essentially a one-man state. He controlled it as if it were a military unit, so it had no staying power. In his insatiable search for plunder he wrought havoc on settled society and on agriculture alike, building towers of skulls outside many of the cities he had sacked - from Moscow to Delhi. One motive for his conquests was to control the central caravan route linking Asia with Europe; this may explain his calculated destruction of the cities servicing the north-

erly route (Urgench, Saray, Berke, Batu, Astrakhan and Azov among others). His rule was reactionary in that he restored the power of the nomad pastoral aristocracy at the expense of settled agriculture, which was left in ruins, and thus he undid the farsighted reforms of Ghazan.



Shrine of Abdallah Ansari near Herat, Afghanistan restored and embellished by Shahrugh in 1428-29

Entire populations were deliberately resettled far from their ancestral lands, while artisans, the human debris of his conquests, were scooped up en masse and dispatched to work on his projects in Samarkand, which he chose as his capital. He embellished it with gardens and palaces galore, with a gigantic Friday mosque named after his consort, and with his own tomb, the Gur-e Amir, which became a family mausoleum. The splendour of his court life is described in exhaustive detail in a lengthy account written by Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, an ambassador from distant Castile who vis-

ited Samarkand and Timur's palace at Kish between 1404 and 1406.

Timur himself was illiterate and had little time for cultural or indeed theological pursuits, though it is recorded that he enjoyed playing chess and that he decorated his palaces with wall paintings of his battles. He

er 15th century, and its princes, cultivated though some of them were in several aspects of Persian culture, were powerless to block the rise of new nomadic federations Turcomans who divided most of Iran and some of Iraq and Anatolia between them, or of the Uzbeks of Transoxania. Between them these new polities absorbed most of the crumbling Timurid empire, leaving the last Timurid prince, Sultan Husayn Bayqara (1469-1506 CE) with little more than the rump of his ancestor's vast empire — the city of Herat and its environs. It is hard to see Timur's own legacy as anything more than a balance sheet drenched in blood.

Throughout this period, far too much land throughout the Timurid empire was distributed as fiefs to Timurid princes, military commanders or hereditary rulers who governed them autonomously. These new systems of land ownership weakened the central government by bestowing administrative immunity and tax exemption on those who owned the land and already exercised much judicial and military authority. Timur's political legacy was disorder and chronic succession disputes. But his descendants presided over a remarkable flowering of the arts and sciences that justifies being termed the Timurid Renaissance. Shahrugh was by temperament a man of peace; he was also a poet and had a vivid sense of history. His wife Gauhar Shad was the patron of major building campaigns in Mashhad (e.g. the mosque that bears her name) and Herat (where her mausoleum is located). The Timurid period saw the apotheosis of colour in architecture as well as bold innovations in vaulting and the assured handling of spatial complexities on a vast scale.

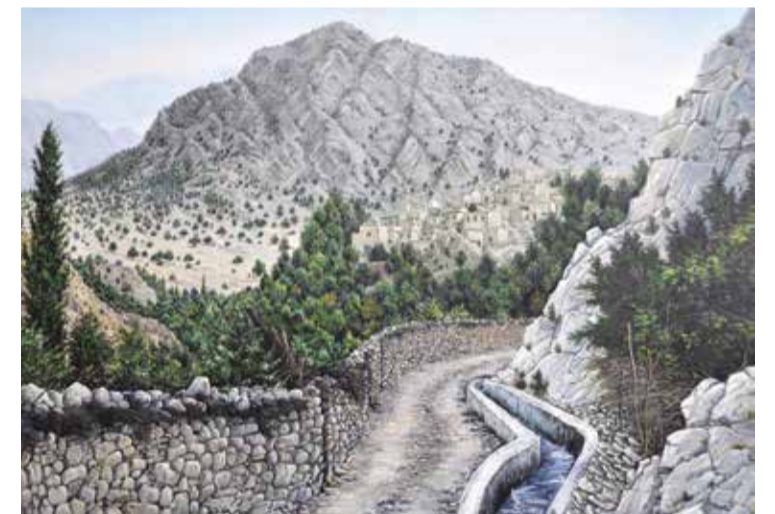
Marin village: A spectacular attraction in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province

Marin village is situated 36 kilometers north of Gachsaran and 198 km southwest of Yasuj, in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad Province. The village has Deli Ganj Mountain on the north, Khamin Mountain on the east, and Kuh-e-Dil Protected Area on the southwest. The historical village, with a mild climate and scenic and spectacular places, is one of the popular and attractive districts of the region.

northern province of Gilan, this village has a *pelekani* (staircase) style of architecture. This means that the roofs of a series of buildings serve as the courtyards of the structures constructed above them. The people of Marin village are farmers, gardeners, and ranchers. Dry farming and wet farming are common to grow wheat, grain, and vegetables. They also cultivate various fruits including pomegran-



tripyar.com



tripyar.com



IRNA

Marin village, located along the road extending from Susa to Persepolis and Bishapur, hosts a large number of ancient castles. The inhabitants of Marin village speak Lori, visitiran.ir wrote. Over 1,000 meters above sea level, Marin village rests on the slopes of a valley. Shah Bahram River flows on the northeastern side of the village, and Kosar Dam makes a lake in the district, located 17 km from the village.

Most cottages of the village are made of clay and chopped straw, stone, adobe, bricks, and wooden beams. Just like Massouleh village in the

ates, lemons, grapes, and figs. In Marin village men wear shirts and trousers, felt hats, shawls, leather belt and *giveh* (a type of traditional shoes), and women wear kerchiefs, headresses, shirts, trousers, chador, and *giveh*. Kilims, *jajims* (a type of traditional floor covering), and carpets are among the handicrafts produced in the village. Animal species living throughout the region include boar, wolf, fox, hawk, rabbit and partridge. Some medicinal plants like *Tragacanth*, *Echium amoenum*, and *Pistacia terebinthus* can be found in the region.

The above is a lightly edited version of part of a chapter entitled, 'The Timurids - Conquest, Decline and Cultural Flowering', from a book entitled, 'IRAN: Five Millennia of Art and Culture', edited by Ute Franke, Ina Sarikhani Sandmann and Stefan Weber, published by Berlin Museum of Islamic Art. The photos were taken from the book.