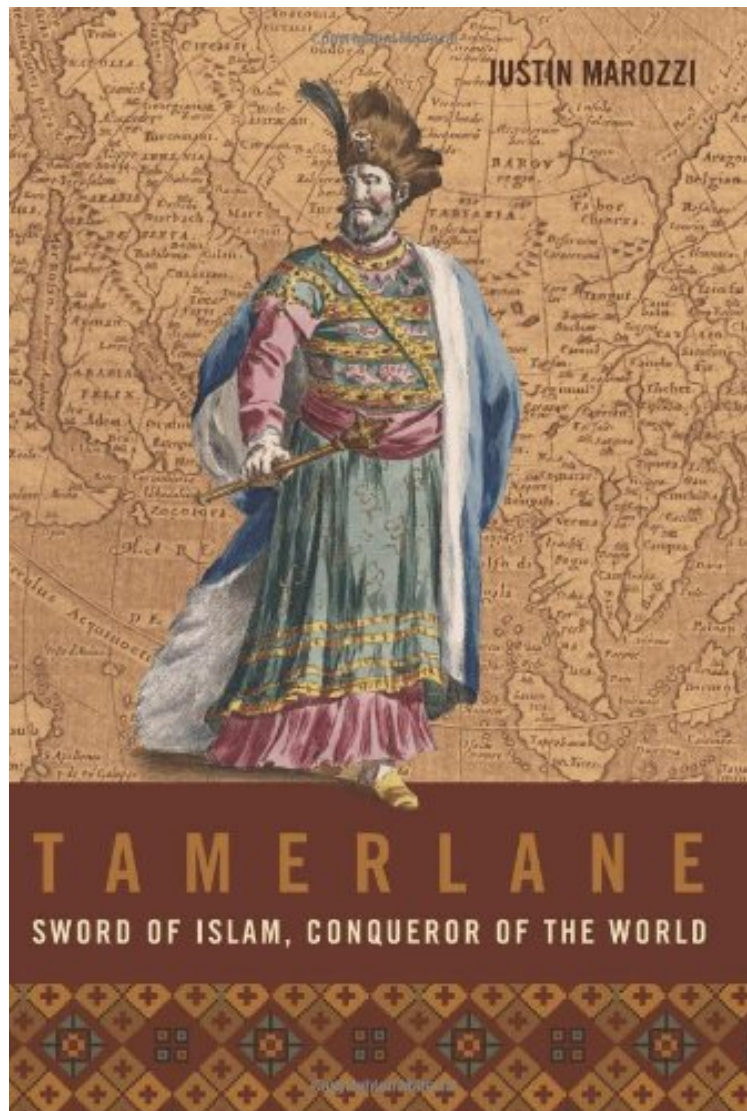


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Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World

Justin Marozzi

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Justin Marozzi : Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Good, Balanced BiographyBy CharlesI, and many others, have been exhausted in recent months by the nonstop political noise machine. So I pulled this book off the shelf, figuring that a biography of the 14th Century warlord Tamerlane would be pretty much non-political. Maybe not as non-political as a coffee table book about, say, flowers, but close, and to me more interesting. I was not disappointed. This book proved an informative escapedepressing at times, certainly, like any tale of violence, but at least I didnt have to think or talk

about 21st Century politics at any time, and wont in this review. For like all of us, I am weary unto death of all that (though not weary enough to not return to it). Most of us, to the extent we think of Tamerlane, lump him in with Genghis Khan, into the historical grouping Mongols who rode horses and killed a lot of people. I know little about Mongols, except what everyone knows, roughly that they swept out of the steppes beginning with Genghis Khan about 1200 A.D., conquering from China to the Middle East; were stopped by the Mamluks at Ain Jalut in Syria in 1260, preventing further conquest in the Middle East; and dominated much of Asia south of todays Siberia for several hundred years. This book helped me fill in the gaps. Tamerlane is popular biographical history, interspersed with travelogues describing the condition today of the stomping grounds of Tamerlane Temur the Lame. These are centered around what is todays Uzbekistan, and stretch from Constantinople (nearly) to Delhi. The author, Justin Marozzi, visited many of the places important in Temurs life. From references to the Taliban being in control of cities he visited, even though the book was published in 2004, he must have traveled prior to 2001. Not that it really matters most of the areas involved have not changed much since Temurs death in 1405, and to the extent they have changed, it has almost exclusively been slow devolution and decay, punctuated by aggressive destruction of ancient architecture and ways of life during the Soviet era. I understand that in the past few years revisionist history about Genghis Khan and the Mongols has been all the rage, led by Jack Weatherford, who claims that the Mongols were wonders of rationality and tolerance, not the casual killers of tens of millions history has told us. Or, cribbing from the blurb for one of Weatherfords books, In nearly every country the Mongols conquered, they brought an unprecedented rise in cultural communication, expanded trade, and a blossoming of civilization. Vastly more progressive than his European or Asian counterparts, Genghis Khan abolished torture, granted universal religious freedom, and smashed feudal systems of aristocratic privilege. I dont know the truth of the matter, although revisionist history is always suspect, since it holds rich rewards for the author, at least if the revision is in the direction approved by the society of the day. Weatherford apparently claims that the European Renaissance was largely based on copying the Mongols, and his latest book apparently tries to not only make the case that Genghis was uniquely religiously tolerant, but that Thomas Jefferson relied heavily on Genghis Khan for his political theory. Like the stupid tale that the American Constitution was founded in any way on Iroquois political organization, those derivations are probably completely false. But maybe I will opine further on that another day, since I know my readers are aching for my opinions on every topic under the sun. Today we will stick to this history, which is not especially revisionist, but it is balanced. Marozzi uses three main sources. The two local ones he identifies as both terribly biased, in opposite directions. One, Ahmed ibn Arabshah, was a Syrian captured as a boy during the destruction of Damascus by Tamerlane in 1401. He loathed Tamerlane a pretty good idea of his approach can be gotten from his description of Tamerlanes birth: The birthplace of this deceiver was a village of a lord named Ilgar in the territory of Keshmay Allah remove him from the garden of Paradise! And thats relatively tame. The second was Sharaf al-din Ali Yazdi, a contemporary and acquaintance of Tamerlane, who became his grandsons sycophantic court historian. The third source is Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, a Spanish nobleman sent as ambassador by King Henry III of Castile in 1402. Clavijo spent time at Tamerlanes court in Samarkand near the end of Tamerlanes life, at the height of his power, and was a fascinated, objective, generally positive observer. Marozzi does a good job of combining these three sources (and he rejects the supposed autobiographies of Tamerlane discovered in the 17th Century as fake). Tamerlane was born around 1336, the son of a minor nobleman from a Turkic Mongol tribe. Other than that, he had no blood connection to Genghis Khan, even if popular association of the two creates endless confusion in trivia games. He showed boldness early, and rose in local conflicts, receiving in his twenties the two injuries to his right arm and leg that gave him the accurate sobriquet Lame. (In the 1940s Russian archaeologists exhumed Tamerlanes skeleton and confirmed the injuries, though how he received them is obscure.) In the usual manner of Asian nomads, alliances were constantly shifting, betrayal was the norm, customary law was important (such that Tamerlane ruled under a nominally superior puppet khan), and settling down regarded with contempt. The conquerors career then pretty much unfolded as youd expect. He consolidated power in a small area, then he expanded his power, then he consolidated it again. He campaigned almost every year of his long life, often (but not always) wintering somewhere, and rarely returning for long to his theoretical capital, Samarkand. He conquered all of Persia, much of the Caucasus, and Asia Minor. He defeated the Ottomans and took prisoner the Sultan, Bayazid the Thunderbolt, the first and last time the Ottomans were defeated until World War I. (I always like the descriptive nicknames the Ottomans gave to their Sultans, like Suleiman the Magnificent and Selim the Sot.) Then he conquered northern India, the Levant and Egypt (but not Arabia, probably because there wasnt enough booty). And he was on the way to China with a massive army, to subdue the (other) Mongols who ruled there, when he died at about the age of seventy whereupon his empire quickly fragmented. Tamerlanes own religious beliefs were a fluid as most men of conquest. He was Muslim, most definitely, but cared little for the details. Sometimes he posed as Shia, sometimes as Sunni. He liked Sufis. He kept court astrologers; when he liked what they said, he agreed with them; when he didnt, he excoriated them as anti-Muslim. He killed far more Muslims than Christians, although he constantly said he intended to smite the heathen, the Christians and the polytheists, instead he almost always ended up smiting other Muslims, whom he of course characterized as deficient Muslims so he had an excuse. Like most Mongols, religion wasnt really his thing; he took an opportunistic, instrumentalist approach to it (which, contra

Weatherford, is not the same thing as tolerance). It would be a silly exercise to try to subtly analyze Tamerlane's motives, and to his credit Marozzi doesn't try. Tamerlane was a hugely ambitious man driven by raw desires: for conquest, to feed his ego; for booty, to enrich himself and motivate his armies; and for the pleasures of the flesh—alcohol, food, and women. If we're being honest, that makes him not much different from most men—just more successful and less restrained. In pursuit of these goals, he slaughtered enormous numbers of men, women and children in the most gruesome ways, including frequently live burials, leaving literal towers of skulls all over a vast area. This makes him a bad person, and one of history's great killers, along with Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. Romanticizing him would be a mistake, as would be ascribing his atrocities in some fashion to Islam itself (which certainly gave him theological backing for jihad, but he interpreted that in an utterly self-interested fashion, and if he hadn't had that excuse, as Genghis had not, he would have found another). It was another time, and a long time ago, and the only lesson is that human nature, when unrestrained, does not, whatever Steven Pinker says, lead to good things. Sure, the book has a few clunkers. Several times in the book Marozzi refers to Tamerlane using Greek Fire, the Byzantine incendiary mixture. I had never heard of Greek Fire being used other than by the Byzantines (its recipe was a state secret and now lost), much less by horse-borne nomads, and a little research showed that while Tamerlane may have used some form of incendiary such as flaming pitch occasionally, it was not Greek Fire. It is not true that Tamerlane's grandson, Ulug Beg, created star tables still in use at the time England appointed its first Astronomer-Royal in the seventeenth century, by which Marozzi apparently means to imply they were used in England at that time. They were still in use in the Muslim world, since Muslim science as a whole had come to a crashing halt centuries before, and Ulug Beg was a rare exception. But the tables were never used in Europe, since Ulug Beg's star tables were not available in Europe until after Tycho Brahe (who had a telescope, as Ulug Beg did not) had already published vastly more complete and accurate tables, starting in the 1570s. And while Christians appear little in this book, Marozzi is often guilty of the common modern obeisance to political correctness of whitewashing atrocities against Christians by Muslims, such as noting the massive slaughter of Christians at Antioch in 1263 by not mentioning the word Christian at all, thus concealing the slaughter had anything to do with Christians, but highlighting the reverse at every opportunity. None of these minor errors and foibles really have a significant effect on the book, though. And I was able to escape the 21st Century for a few hours, which is definitely a good thing. Plus, now I am more likely to win at trivia games that ask me to distinguish among Mongol warlords!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Great Liberator or The Devil? Excellent Biography By DTS@BigIslandRanch After visiting Samarkand, Shakhrisabz, Bukhara and Termez, I was fascinated by Tamerlane. In Uzbekistan, he is the Great Liberator; in the West, he is The Devil. There are very few books about this warrior whose empire was larger than Genghis Khan's or Alexander's. Marozzi's book is long but reads like a thriller. It is very well researched and well written. He cites passages from historians who were contemporaries of Tamerlane as well as later writers from the Middle East and Europe. He interweaves the past with his own observations as he follows the decades-long path of Tamerlane's conquests and mass slaughters. Marozzi's descriptions of the magnificent architecture in the great cities of the Silk Road are spectacular. Highly recommended. Douglas Shinsato Translator of "For That One Day: The Memoirs of Mitsuo Fuchida, the Commander of the Attack on Pearl Harbor" Author of "101 Lesser Known Facts Related to the Attack on Pearl Harbor"

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Timur was a pimp By jinha Fascinating book on Tamerlane. It's very detailed and the author makes painstaking contrast or comparisons to each specific area then and now. It's shocking how the world can change completely and how much impact Genghis Khan and Tamerlane had in history. The brutal efficiency on war and economy these two conquerors were able to apply makes all other conquerors look second class. Some people may get turned off by the format of the book. Each chapter basically starts with whatever objective or event Timur is occupied at the time then ends with something of a cliffhanger in which the author then proceeds to describe the relevant region in its modern state and compares it to the past. Then it comes back to Timur and proceeds with the story. Of course, it also deals with Timur as a person and his style of government as well as the qualities of his heir and his subsequent legacy. I can't say enough how well the author describes the cities, region, daily life and the relevant characters at the time in each chapter. Especially the grand cities and how certain wealthy regions were either absorbed or razed to the ground by Timur. Some of the cities were considered to be better than Europe's finest at the time in wealth and culture. It's an eye opener and a fresh breath of air compared to most Euro-centric history books that simply brush off "Oriental" culture. Great read.

A powerful account of the life of Tamerlane the Great (1336-1405), the last great Mongol conqueror of Central Asia, ruler of a vast empire, and one of history's most brutal tyrants Tamerlane, aka Temur—the Mongol successor to Genghis Khan—ranks with Alexander the Great as one of the world's great conquerors, yet the details of his life are scarcely known in the West. Born in obscurity and poverty, he rose to become a fierce tribal leader, and with that his dominion and power grew with astonishing speed. He blazed through Asia, razing cities to the ground. He tortured conquered inhabitants without mercy, sometimes ordering them buried alive, at other times decapitating them. Over the ruins of conquered Baghdad, Tamerlane had his soldiers erect a pyramid of 90,000 enemy heads. As he and his armies swept through Central Asia, sacking, and then rebuilding cities, Tamerlane gradually imposed an iron rule and a refined

culture over a vast territory—from the steppes of Asia to the Syrian coastline. Justin Marozzi traveled in the footsteps of this fearsome emperor of Samarkand (modern-day Uzbekistan) to write this book, which is part history, part travelogue. He carefully follows the path of this infamous and enigmatic conqueror, recounting the history and the story of this cruel, cultivated, and indomitable warrior. About the Author: Justin Marozzi, a journalist, has traveled extensively throughout the Muslim world. Recently he has been on assignment in Iraq. He is the author of *South from Barbary*.

From Publishers Weekly By the time of his death in 1405, the Mongol conqueror Tamerlane—a pejorative derivative of the nickname "Temur the Lame"—commanded as much land and fear as any ruler in history. Literally following in the footsteps of Ghengis Khan, he built his empire with one invasion after the next, eventually amassing a kingdom that stretched "from Moscow to the Mediterranean, from Delhi to Damascus." Nonetheless, Tamerlane remains relatively unknown in the Western world, taking a historical backseat to Ghengis despite a reign and ruthlessness every bit as remarkable. Faced with such a complex and underreported subject, Marozzi delivers an exceptional account of the emperor's life, revealing him to be both an extravagantly merciless tyrant and tireless proponent for the cultural and architectural progress in his beloved Samarkand (in modern day Uzbekistan). One peculiar choice, however, is the book's subtitle, as Tamerlane killed tens of thousands of his fellow Muslims along his so-called "pilgrimage of destruction," including a particularly bloody massacre of Baghdad that left 90,000 dead, "their heads cemented into 120 towers." The subtitle certainly wasn't chosen for a lack of nicknames, as Tamerlane's life produced plenty: "Lord of the Fortunate Conjunction." "Emperor of the Age." "Unconquered Lord of the Seven Climes." "Scourge of God." The list goes on, too, leading one to wonder how it is that such a large part of the world hardly recognizes name. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From The New Yorker This revisionist history traces the rise of the fourteenth-century warlord Temur -- known in the West as Tamerlane -- from a crippled peasant boy wandering the steppe to ruler of half the known world. Marozzi asserts that while Temur, like Ghengis Kahn, specialized in razing cities and slaughtering their inhabitants, he also had the wisdom to rebuild, and Islamic art and architecture flourished on his watch. Marozzi quotes widely from contemporaneous accounts, relishing the fantastical detail. In India, for example, Temur countered the armored elephants of Delhi with "roaring camels on fire," then had the defeated beasts brought before him and forced to kneel. Along the way, Marozzi makes a pilgrimage through Temur's former empire, and argues that the Soviets outdid the warlord in destruction by turning the once fertile basin of Central Asia into a dust bowl. Copyright 2006 The New Yorker From Booklist A nomadic mass of destruction, Tamerlane (1336-1405) was just sedentary enough to leave behind, in addition to his signature monuments of piled skulls, the great Islamic architecture of Samarkand. Marozzi is an up-and-coming journalist-travel writer (*South from Barbary: Along the Slave Routes of Libyan Sahara*, 2001) who melds the biography with visits to sites of Tamerlane's battles, atrocities, and buildings. Richly describing central Asia's steppe and desert, Marozzi recounts Tamerlane's initial claim on his due portion of Ghengis Khan's empire. Following the warlord's widening conquests, Marozzi sorts through the panegyrics and condemnations of chroniclers of the time, whose dominantly opprobrious opinion of Tamerlane descends for the West via Christopher Marlowe's famous drama *Tamburlaine* (1587) and periodic studies. The previous popular biography (*Tamburlaine the Conqueror*, by Hilda Hookham, 1962) is out of print, and Uzbekistan has adopted Tamerlane as its national hero, which further recommends Marozzi's fine performance of evoking the past and present of one of history's most lurid empire builders. Gilbert Taylor Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved