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An Analysis of Timur's Cultural Strategy in His Rivalry with the Ottoman Empire

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ABSTRACT

Although the rivalry between Timur and the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid reached its climax at the Battle of Ankara in 1402, it was never confined to the battlefield; cultural and spiritual domains also constituted arenas of indirect confrontation between the two powers. The principal research question is: What was Timur's cultural strategy in his rivalry with the Ottoman Empire? The study hypothesizes that, recognizing the potential of soft power, Timur adopted a cultural strategy against the Ottomans that incorporated such components as the instrumental use of religious scholars and Sufis, the civilizational reconstruction of Samarkand, and pilgrimage diplomacy. The study employs a descriptive-analytical method, and the data were collected through library research. The findings indicate that Timur's cultural strategy consisted of four principal components: (1) the forced relocation of Ottoman scholarly and religious elites to Samarkand; (2) Sufi diplomacy aimed at obtaining signs of spiritual endorsement and weakening the foundations of Ottoman legitimacy; (3) the transformation of Samarkand into the physical and symbolic center of Islamic civilization through monumental architecture and its display to foreign envoys; and (4) the application of pilgrimage diplomacy—including endowments for the Two Holy Sanctuaries, the protection of pilgrims, and discursive criticism of the Mamluks and Ottomans—to redefine the title of "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." It is concluded that, by combining military hard power with cultural soft power, Timur sought to consolidate his religious and political legitimacy while delegitimizing his rival.

Keywords: *Timur, Ottoman Empire, cultural strategy, soft power, Samarkand.*

Introduction

Cultural power and influence have long played a fundamental role in foreign policy as instruments of soft power, determining states' ability to influence other societies and shape political and cultural interactions. These instruments, which include religion, art, education, historical heritage, and ways of life, may exert influence either directly—through formal cultural programs—or indirectly—through people-to-people exchanges and the movement of elites. During the reign of Timur (1336–1405), cultural instruments were deliberately employed within the framework of a cultural strategy in foreign policy in order both to consolidate domestic legitimacy and to expand regional influence against rival powers. As one of the most prominent rulers of the fourteenth and early fifteenth



centuries, Timur complemented his military and political achievements by using cultural resources to transform Samarkand and other centers under his rule into major scientific, religious, and artistic hubs of the Islamic world. The attraction of religious scholars, Sufis, artists, and artisans from conquered territories, patronage of science and the arts, and particular attention to the pilgrimage and religious diplomacy all constituted major components of Timur's cultural strategy toward the Ottomans. These measures not only contributed to the consolidation of Timur's domestic authority and political legitimacy, but also laid the groundwork for cultural and ideological competition with contemporary powers, particularly the Ottoman Empire. In his interaction with the Ottomans, Timur's cultural strategy played an important role in delegitimizing the rival power and elevating his own status as a guardian of Islam and learning. Patronage of religious scholars, the establishment of scientific and religious centers in Samarkand and Herat, and emphasis on the pilgrimage all demonstrate the deliberate application of cultural strategy in foreign policy as a complement to his military operations, including the Battle of Ankara in 1402. Against this historical background, the principal question of this study is: What components constituted Timur's cultural strategy toward the Ottomans, and how did he employ such instruments as patronage of scholars and Sufis, pilgrimage diplomacy, and the strategic use of art and religion to acquire religious and political legitimacy, delegitimize the rival power, and expand his cultural influence? Examining this issue not only clarifies the role of cultural instruments in Timurid foreign policy, but also demonstrates how culture and religion can simultaneously be employed to consolidate domestic power, advance regional competition, and shape international relations.

Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

In international relations theory, soft power is a concept introduced by Joseph S. Nye, one of the most prominent theorists in the field. Nye defines soft power as the ability of a country to achieve its objectives by attracting and persuading others rather than through direct coercion or threats. This form of power derives from the attractiveness of a society's culture, values, and policies and causes other actors in the international system to "want the same outcomes that the powerful country seeks." This definition, which clearly distinguishes soft power from hard or military power, has provided the foundation for numerous modern analyses of the role of culture, diplomacy, and social values in states' foreign policies (1).

Cultural diplomacy is recognized as one of the practical components of soft power. It refers to the use of cultural instruments, including language, art, education, and scientific and media exchanges, to attract the attention and trust of a target society, promote mutual understanding, and strengthen international relations. From this perspective, cultural diplomacy seeks to generate attractiveness and foster a positive identity in the perceptions of others regarding a country's values and social system. It therefore constitutes an essential component of the mechanisms of soft power in foreign policy (1).

Review of the Literature

The relationship between power and culture during Timur's reign, particularly in his confrontation with contemporary powers such as the Ottoman Empire, has received limited and fragmented attention in previous studies. A critical review of the existing literature indicates that, despite their value, these studies have generally examined specific and isolated dimensions of Timur's record and have failed to provide a comprehensive, theoretically grounded account.

Rafi'i, in the article "The Religious Policy of Amir Timur Gurkani," confines the discussion to a reconsideration of Timur's personal beliefs and, without analyzing the strategic function of those beliefs in competition with neighboring Muslim powers such as the Ottomans, merely presents the struggle against unbelievers and the propagation of Islam as the objectives of Timur's conquests (2). Ajand, in "Timur's Artistic Policy," and Salehi Kia and colleagues, in "Analysis of the Role of Migrant Artists and Craftsmen in the Flourishing of Civilization in the Timurid Era," refer to the relocation of artists and artisans to Samarkand. Nevertheless, they interpret these measures solely within the framework of developing the capital or demonstrating the legitimacy of Timur's power among Iranian and Turco-Mongol populations, while overlooking the competitive and aggressive function of intellectually and technically depleting a rival's territory (3, 4).

Other studies, including "An Examination of the Status of Science and Art at the Court of Amir Timur Gurkani," Izadi's "Reconsidering the Motives and Objectives of the Timurids in Their Religious Policies," studies of Timurid urban development in Samarkand and Herat, and Bayat's "A Typology of the Sources of Legitimacy in the Period of Timur," have primarily described the position of artists, religious policies, urban-development activities, or sources of legitimacy. They have not, however, analyzed these components together as a coherent system operating within competition against a specific power, namely the Ottoman Empire (2, 5-7).

This review reveals three principal gaps. First, there is no integrated and theoretically grounded analysis of all components of Timur's cultural strategy—religious scholars, Sufis, artists, artisans, architecture, urban development, and pilgrimage diplomacy—as a coherent system. Second, insufficient attention has been paid to the competitive function of these measures against the Ottoman Empire, with most analyses treating them in abstraction from their political setting. Third, neglected dimensions include the forced relocation of Ottoman scientific and artistic elites, transregional Sufi diplomacy, and the use of the pilgrimage as an arena of soft-power competition. Drawing on primary sources, the present study seeks to fill these gaps and demonstrate that Timur functioned as an "intelligent architect of soft power" in his rivalry with the Ottoman Empire, using culture, art, religion, science, and urban development as strategic instruments for domestic legitimation, external weakening, and ultimate superiority over his rival.

The Strategic Use of the Symbolic Capital of Religious Scholars and Sufis in Legitimation

At the beginning of his rise to power, Timur effectively based his legitimacy on an asserted association with the Chinggisids, the dynasty of Genghis Khan. As his territory expanded and the effectiveness of this Chinggisid genealogy in consolidating his rule diminished, however, court historians altered the prevailing discourse and interpreted Timur's sovereignty as a "divine gift" and a favor bestowed by God (7). Accordingly, from the earliest stages of consolidating his power, Timur's systematic attention to scholars and religious authorities as a strategic pillar of his system of governance is readily observable (8). He consistently placed himself in interaction with groups of religious scholars and displayed an inclination to debate and converse with Sufi shaykhs, theologians, and, more generally, representatives of the spiritual life of society (2, 9). Timur treated religious scholars with profound respect and devotion and did not neglect to honor their status, as they regarded themselves as heirs to the prophetic mission and successors to the Prophet's spiritual authority (10). Within Timur's cultural strategy in competition with the Ottoman Empire, this approach extended beyond domestic relations and became an instrument for weakening the rival's intellectual and spiritual foundations while legitimizing his own rule. Among the distinguished scholars whom Timur ordered to be relocated to Samarkand—a measure that possessed strategic significance in neutralizing

Ottoman scientific and religious influence—was Shaykh Shams al-Din Muhammad al-Jazari (11). For a considerable period, al-Jazari had been among the attendants of the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid (12). When Timur defeated Bayezid, he dispatched several of his amirs to different regions of Rum to plunder and seize property. In the Bursa region, Shaykh Shams al-Din al-Jazari, who was attempting to flee, was captured and brought before Timur. Amir Timur ordered that he be taken to Samarkand. Al-Jazari remained there until Timur's death and composed *Tashih al-Masabih* in that city. After Timur's death, he traveled for a time to Herat and ultimately died in Shiraz during Shah Rukh's reign (11, 13). Together with Shaykh Shams al-Din Muhammad al-Jazari, Muhammad Zahid al-Bukhari—a distinguished Qur'anic exegete and hadith scholar who had reportedly written a one-hundred-volume commentary on the Qur'an—was also captured and sent to Samarkand (13). This forced relocation of Ottoman scientific and religious elites formed part of Timur's cultural strategy to transfer the rival's symbolic capital to his own territory and produce a form of “intellectual depletion” within the Ottoman domain.

The forced relocation of Ottoman scientific and religious elites by Timur may be examined as more than a merely punitive or demonstrative action. Although historical sources do not provide precise and extensive reports of Timur's capture of large numbers of prominent Ottoman scholars—and documented instances appear to have been relatively limited—it remains possible that Timur possessed at least some awareness of the potential of “intellectual weakening” as an instrument in competition with the Ottoman Empire. Since soft power rests on attraction rather than coercion, certain aspects of Timur's conduct toward the Ottomans may be interpreted within the framework of “offensive soft power,” a concept in which the enhancement of one's own attractiveness is pursued through the reduction of a rival's attractiveness. When Timur succeeded in transferring renowned scholars from conquered territories, including Ottoman lands, to Samarkand, he appears to have pursued objectives extending beyond the mere accumulation of human capital. Such relocations may, for example, have contributed to the partial disruption of the rival territory's “chain of legitimacy reproduction,” in the sense that a temporary and limited intellectual vacuum may have emerged in the post-Timurid Ottoman domain. This interpretation, however, rests more on the internal logic of soft-power strategy than on an abundance of historical evidence and must therefore be expressed with considerable caution. Timur may have consciously pursued such a strategy, or these consequences may have arisen unintentionally from his conduct. What can be stated with greater confidence is that, in documented cases such as his relationship with Khwaja Ali Siyahpush al-Safavi, discussed below, Timur demonstrated awareness of the “symbolic capital” of Sufis and scholars and sought to appropriate it for his own benefit. Extending this pattern to a deliberate “weakening of the Ottoman intellectual foundations” requires additional historical evidence and should currently be treated as a research hypothesis rather than a definitive finding. Nevertheless, if one accepts that Timur was at least partly aware of the strategic value of relocating intellectual elites, it may be argued that, alongside his “engineering of Samarkand's development,” he also exhibited signs of attention to the “engineering of the weakening of the rival's intellectual foundations,” although the scope and depth of this strategy still require more detailed historical investigation.

Distinguished scholars within Timur's inner circle assisted him in various ways in achieving his objectives. Timur sought to portray himself as a reviver and propagator of Islam and thereby construct a religious justification for his conquests, an endeavor that played a central role in his competition with the Ottomans, who likewise presented themselves as defenders of the Islamic tradition. The scholars in his company confirmed and supported these claims. Mir Sayyid Sharif al-Jurjani, for example—who was both a prominent sayyid and a renowned scholar—in a letter addressed to Timur, described him as a propagator and reviver of the Islamic sharia chosen by God to fulfill

this mission (8). Through the strategic use of scholars, intellectual captivity, and the redefinition of religious legitimacy, Timur was therefore able to appropriate the cultural and spiritual arena in his favor beyond the battlefield and reconstruct the image of a ruler appointed by God in opposition to the Ottoman “ghazis.”

Timur consistently displayed profound respect for Sufi elders and adherents of the mystical path and showed a strong desire to associate and converse with them (14). This approach, however, also constituted an intelligent response to the intellectual and social structure of the contemporary Islamic world (15). When Timur entered the arena of politics and power, Islamic lands, particularly their eastern regions, were permeated by Sufi ideas and the institutional culture of the *khanqah*. Throughout this vast territory, numerous shaykhs presided over major Sufi lodges, attracted relatively large numbers of disciples, and received substantial endowments from followers motivated by sincerity and devotion (16, 17). Whether because of genuine spiritual conviction or political calculation, Timur portrayed himself as deeply devoted and obedient to Sufi shaykhs (17). Within the context of his rivalry with the Ottoman Empire, the strategically significant dimension of this conduct was his use of Sufi networks of influence to legitimize his conquests and weaken the spiritual foundations of his rival (18).

Timur employed every available opportunity and strategy to achieve victory and success. Among all these measures, however, his special attention to Sufism and prominent Sufis—who also exercised extensive influence in Ottoman territories—played a particularly important role in his success. Among the renowned Sufis whom Timur met, Khwaja Ali al-Safavi deserves particular mention, as Timur’s relationship with him constitutes a clear example of his cultural strategy in competition with the Ottoman Empire. According to the author of *Silsilat al-Nasab-i Safavi*, these meetings occurred on three occasions (19). The most famous encounter took place when Timur traveled to Ardabil after his victory over Bayezid in 1402 and, after visiting the tomb of Shaykh Safi al-Din Ardabili, entered into conversation with Khwaja Ali Siyahpush al-Safavi. After Timur became aware of Khwaja Ali’s spiritual abilities and wisdom (20), or, according to another account, after Timur gave him a cup of poison that caused him no harm (21), he became devoted to him and remained attached to his spiritual authority. This inclination reflected Timur’s attempt to secure the support of Sufi currents that also possessed numerous followers in Ottoman territories and could serve as instruments of symbolic influence among Muslim populations. At the request and through the mediation of this shaykh, Timur released prisoners whom he had brought from his campaign against Bayezid. The descendants of these freed captives later formed a group known as the “Rumlu Sufis,” who exerted a decisive influence on the subsequent history of the Safavid dynasty (19, 21). Timur also exempted Khwaja Ali and his descendants from taxation (20). In addition to creating a loyal base in the Ardabil region, which bordered areas of Ottoman influence, this measure demonstrated Timur’s profound understanding of the cultural and political capacities of Sufism in competition with his powerful rival. Through the use of Sufi networks, Timur therefore not only acquired religious legitimacy but also succeeded in establishing centers of spiritual influence within regions connected to his rival.

Timur’s strategy toward Khwaja Ali Siyahpush al-Safavi and other Sufi shaykhs may be theorized through the concept of “Sufi diplomacy,” a strategy in which transregional spiritual networks operate as an “invisible infrastructure of legitimacy” in place of military hard power. Timur clearly understood that military conquests, although necessary, were insufficient to consolidate rule over the long term. What transforms a conqueror from a “bloodthirsty usurper” into a “legitimate ruler” is association with spiritual sources accepted by society. In the Islamic world of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Sufis possessed symbolic capital derived from their ascetic lifestyles, reputed miracles, and close relationships with ordinary people, and no ruler could afford to disregard this capital. By securing the support of Khwaja Ali al-Safavi, whose network of disciples extended into Ottoman Anatolia, Timur

effectively obtained the “seal of approval” of a credible spiritual authority for his government. Although this approval was unofficial and intangible, it exerted a deeper influence on popular perceptions than any formal decree, because people derived legitimacy not from the ruler’s chancery, but from their spiritual guide and master. At a deeper level, Timur’s strategy may be analyzed as a concrete manifestation of “offensive soft power,” in which an increase in one actor’s attractiveness automatically entails a reduction in the attractiveness of its rival. Through the use of Sufi networks, Timur simultaneously accomplished two objectives: first, he demonstrated that the saints of God supported him, thereby increasing his own attractiveness; second, he indirectly implied that his rival, Bayezid, lacked such support and that his rule was therefore devoid of spiritual “blessing.” Timur did not need to declare that “Bayezid is irreligious.” The mere fact that Khwaja Ali al-Safavi—who possessed numerous Ottoman disciples in Anatolia—met him and received him, and that Timur released Ottoman captives at his intercession, conveyed the intended message: “The spiritual pole of this part of the world stands with me, not with you.” This was a “war of narratives” within the domain of soft power, in which competition concerned not territory, but “meaning” and “legitimacy.”

A response to an important theoretical question is also necessary here: Why did Timur, who possessed unrivaled military hard power and had crushed the Ottomans at Ankara, continue to feel the need to secure the support of Sufis such as Khwaja Ali? The answer is clear: hard power can conquer territories, but it cannot capture minds. Timur understood that the fear generated by his massacres and destruction, unless accompanied by cultural and spiritual attractiveness, would lead to repeated revolts and chronic instability in newly conquered Ottoman territories. Through the symbolic capital they possessed among the masses, Sufis could transform Timur’s image from that of a “merciless destroyer” into that of a “king endorsed by the saints.” This constituted the “compensation of a negative image through soft power.” By granting tax exemptions to the Safavid family, honoring the tomb of Shaykh Safi, and releasing captives at Khwaja Ali’s request, Timur effectively demonstrated that he understood hard and soft power as complementary: conquest by the sword and consolidation through the saint’s charisma.

Overall, the use of Sufi networks of influence in competition with the Ottoman Empire may be described as a “less-examined dimension of Timur’s soft power.” Through this strategy, Timur demonstrated that he used social capital as a source of legitimacy, employed informal diplomacy alongside formal diplomacy, including the reception of ambassadors, applied offensive soft power to weaken the spiritual foundations of his rival, and, most importantly, integrated hard and soft power within an intelligent strategy. What occurred in Ardabil between Timur and Khwaja Ali al-Safavi was not merely a ceremonial meeting, but a turning point in the “cultural and spiritual engineering of power” in the eastern Islamic world. It demonstrated that conquering fortresses with siege engines could never equal the conquest of hearts through a “poisoned cup” that caused no harm to the Safavid shaykh.

Samarkand as a New Center of Soft Power

Timur sought to reshape the arena of competition in his own favor by symbolically redefining the center of gravity of Islamic civilization. By creating a new locus of grandeur and legitimacy in Samarkand, he disrupted the existing symbolic order without directly addressing any specific rival and consolidated a new center of soft power in the Islamic world. Because of its symbolic and material richness, this center spoke more eloquently through its studied silence than any formal proclamation. In implementing this strategy, skilled individuals and professional specialists constituted the most valuable category of Timur’s war booty. According to historical sources, after conquering each territory, Timur transferred its notables, elites, architects, engineers, and masters of various crafts to Samarkand.

The objective of these relocations was the development, prosperity, and cultural flourishing of Samarkand. By the time of Timur's death, there was scarcely a region whose most distinguished artists had not been assembled in the city (22-24). Clavijo writes of the transfer of Ottoman artisans and craftsmen to Samarkand: "From Turkey he brought gunsmiths and whatever masters of crafts he could find, including goldsmiths and builders" (25).

Clavijo's report concerning the transfer of "gunsmiths, goldsmiths, and builders" from Ottoman territories to Samarkand demonstrates, beyond a merely developmental initiative, the civilizational significance of the "appropriation of human capital." From a strategic perspective, rather than temporarily exploiting these artisans, Timur transferred them to Samarkand to secure the durable reconstruction and flourishing of his capital and transform it into the principal civilizational center of the Islamic world. Such an objective could not have been achieved without attracting the technical and artistic elites of rival territories, particularly the Ottoman domain. Beyond its developmental aspect, however, this policy can also be analyzed within the framework of the "intellectual and technical depletion of the rival's territory." After its defeat at the Battle of Ankara in 1402, the Ottoman Empire suffered not only military and territorial losses but also the removal of some of its most valuable human resources in gunsmithing, goldsmithing, and architecture to the conqueror's capital. Through this action, Timur effectively disarmed the Ottomans in two respects: first, in ancillary skills related to warfare, particularly firearms manufacture; and second, in symbols of civilizational achievement and urban grandeur, including goldsmithing and construction. What previous studies have regarded merely as a "developmental initiative" acquires, in this reinterpretation, a competitive and offensive meaning. The relocation of Ottoman technical elites was a strategic measure designed to deplete the rival's civilizational foundations and transfer symbols of magnificence and power to Samarkand. More explicitly, Timur weakened his rival in the sphere of soft power as well, and Clavijo's account constitutes evidence of a deliberately conceived civilizational strategy within Timur's record.

Even before invading a territory, Timur attempted to gather precise information regarding the craftsmen and professional specialists residing there (13). This targeted search indicates that Timur planned in advance to exploit their capabilities, and the outcome of this approach was the transformation of Samarkand into a magnificent metropolis and "mother of cities." Timur concentrated both the wealth plundered from the provinces and the artists and craftsmen of conquered territories in Samarkand (3), thereby centralizing the symbolic capital of the Islamic world in his capital. Timur consistently sought to leave a lasting image of his grandeur in the collective memory of the world and therefore patronized those arts that most effectively served this objective. Architects and builders constituted the largest group among the captives because Timur attached particular importance to architecture. Observing the cities of Iran profoundly influenced him and encouraged him to draw upon the abilities of Iranian artists to embellish his royal seat with grace and beauty (5), to such a degree that Samarkand was said to rival paradise itself (26). Clavijo writes that the wealth and abundance of the capital were so extraordinary as to appear unbelievable (25). Surviving buildings from Timur's reign included mosques, palaces, baths, mausoleums, khanqahs, and bazaars, whose principal purpose was to display the grandeur of his government. The congregational mosque of Samarkand provides a prominent example of this approach. Mirkhwand reports that Timur employed two hundred stonecutters at the mosque and five hundred workers in the surrounding mountains and assigned ninety-five elephants from India to transport materials (10, 27). Timur also created extraordinary gardens and palaces bearing such names as "Bustan," "Iram, the Ornament of the World," and "Jannat-i Firdaws" (4, 13, 23). Around Samarkand, he established villages named after major cities such as Damascus, Baghdad, Sultaniyya, and Shiraz (9, 13). Without explicitly referring to any rival, these names clearly demonstrated that Timur

regarded himself as the heir and reviver of the greatest cities of Islamic civilization and positioned his capital above all of them. This naming policy constituted a form of “positive identity creation” for Samarkand and a redefinition of the “values” governing the eastern Islamic world. Timur also took pleasure in displaying his palaces to foreign ambassadors. Clavijo expressed astonishment at a palace whose chambers were decorated with golden and blue tiles (25). These structures carried the fame of the Timurid court beyond its borders and strengthened the legitimacy of Timur’s rule (28).

With a profound, though experiential, awareness of the central role of the “foreign audience” in legitimating power, Timur deliberately and systematically displayed his palaces to foreign ambassadors. This action represented an attempt to activate the mechanism of “attraction” rather than “coercion.” Timur understood that the influence of an astonished ambassador who returned home and described the grandeur of Samarkand at his own court could exceed the effect of numerous military campaigns, because such a narrative captured the minds of other rulers without force and through wonder and envy. By displaying his palaces, Timur sought to replace fear in the ambassadors’ minds with envy—the envy produced by witnessing something “superior to what one possesses.” Clavijo, the Castilian ambassador, expressed astonishment at a palace decorated with golden and blue tiles (25). This astonishment constituted precisely the “desired response” of soft power, in which a foreign observer, without military coercion or political pressure, perceives the other as superior and involuntarily redefines the hierarchy of power in his own mind. An ambassador who emerged astonished from golden halls could no longer regard his own king as Timur’s equal. Through this strategy, Timur effectively transformed foreign embassies into “privileged audiences of his cultural diplomacy.” He turned architecture into a silent medium more eloquent than any formal declaration or governmental decree. Cultural diplomacy commonly emphasizes scientific, artistic, and linguistic exchanges, but Timur brought a form of “architectural diplomacy” to its height, in which buildings themselves spoke, transmitted values, and consolidated hegemony without uttering a single threat.

From a semiotic perspective, Timur’s palaces should be regarded as “open texts” that each ambassador decoded according to his own cultural system. A Christian ambassador from Castile, such as Clavijo, interpreted the golden and blue tiles as signs of unparalleled wealth and almost supernatural power. A Muslim ambassador from Egypt or India could interpret the domes and inscriptions as representations of an ideal caliphate and the continuation of the Prophetic tradition. Through this practice, Timur transmitted “a range of mutually reinforcing messages” to different audiences. All of these messages, however, converged on a single proposition: “The center of Islamic civilization and the prosperous East is here, in Samarkand.” More subtly, Timur never “explained” or “interpreted” these palaces. He merely displayed them. This eloquent silence constituted another intelligent strategy: when one is not required to explain one’s own grandeur, the observer is compelled to reach the conclusion independently, and personal conclusions are invariably more durable and influential than formal assertions. Moreover, the display of palaces to ambassadors was not a one-time act. Clavijo’s account indicates that Timur repeated these demonstrations and on each occasion revealed something newer or more astonishing. Within the framework of cultural diplomacy, this deliberate repetition resembled “destination marketing” before the modern era. Samarkand was established as a “powerful brand” in the minds of political elites across the Islamic world and beyond, and every ambassador unintentionally became its promoter. At a broader level, this strategy may be analyzed in contrast to Timur’s destructive hard power. On the battlefield, Timur could devastate a city such as Isfahan and raise towers of skulls, representing brutal hard power; in Samarkand, however, the same destroyer became the most magnificent builder. In an era of fluid frontiers, Timur used Samarkand’s civilizational attractiveness to establish cultural

hegemony over much of the eastern Islamic world, a hegemony rooted in the admiration and envy of ambassadors and elites. Ultimately, it may be argued that the display of palaces to ambassadors constitutes a missing link in many traditional analyses of Timur. This apparently simple practice encapsulated his entire cultural strategy: conquering minds through the eyes, acquiring legitimacy through display, and reshaping the competitive arena without once naming the rival.

In some of Timur's architectural projects, religious beliefs operated alongside political objectives, and several projects were designed for religious purposes, including shrines, mosques, and khanqahs (6). Beyond promoting the sharia, Timur's principal motivation was to acquire religious legitimacy for his government. He regarded the neglect of religious monuments as a sign of the impiety of previous rulers and constructed buildings over the tombs of religious figures to demonstrate his own religiosity (23). After the conquest of India, he called his campaign a "ghazwa" and commemorated it through the construction of the congregational mosque of Samarkand (11). He thereby presented himself as a ghazi and defender of Islam, an image that marginalized earlier claimants to this status in the contemporary Islamic world without directly referring to them. Overall, an analysis of Timur's cultural strategy demonstrates that, by concentrating elites in Samarkand, patronizing monumental architecture, symbolically naming villages after major Islamic cities, and emphasizing religious legitimacy through the construction of sacred buildings, he created a cultural and civilizational stage on which his grandeur was so conspicuous that any observer was compelled to identify Timurid Samarkand as the true center of power and magnificence in the eastern Islamic world. This was the conquest of minds through an indirect display of power and, over the long term, the most effective form of restructuring the field of cultural competition.

The Pilgrimage as an Arena of Soft-Power Competition

In the Islamic world of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the pilgrimage and the Two Holy Sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina constituted strategic arenas for political legitimation and cultural diplomacy. Any ruler capable of presenting himself as the "Custodian of the Two Holy Sanctuaries" or "Protector of the Pilgrimage Route" acquired symbolic capital that extended beyond the geographical boundaries of his territory and influenced the entire Islamic world. The Ottoman sultans, who regarded themselves as caliphs of the Islamic world, devoted considerable attention to the development and prosperity of the two holy cities, particularly Mecca. Their close relations with the sharifs of Mecca, efforts to improve and reconstruct the sanctuaries, and renovation and expansion of the Sacred Mosque may be evaluated within the framework of this policy (29). Timur, as a conqueror who sought to reorder the symbolic structure of Islamic civilization in his own favor, was likewise well aware of this strategic capacity. Through claims of "reviving Islam," challenges to the legitimacy of rival powers, particularly the Egyptian Mamluks and the Ottomans, military operations justified in terms of protecting pilgrims, and endowments for the Two Holy Sanctuaries, he sought to establish himself as the "most worthy custodian of the holy places" within the civilizational imagination of the Islamic world. Timur regarded himself as a reviver of Islam and justified his campaigns as forms of "Islamic jihad" (8, 10). This self-perception formed the central core of his legitimating discourse. Within this framework, Timur viewed the Mamluk sultans of Egypt—who exercised authority over the Two Holy Sanctuaries and appointed the governors of these sacred centers—as weak and merely subordinate figures and maintained that they lacked the qualifications necessary to administer the holy places. This discursive criticism exceeded a simple political observation and constituted an attempt to "discredit the rival's spiritual foundations" within the sphere of soft power. In a letter to the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid, who likewise styled himself as a defender of Islam, Timur

declared that the rulers of Egypt had no right to boast or claim the title “Sultan of the Two Holy Sanctuaries” and that only service to and residence near the two sanctuaries could constitute a source of honor for them (30). Although the letter was addressed directly to the Ottoman ruler, its message extended to all of Timur’s rivals in the Islamic world, including both the Mamluks and the Ottomans: religious titles possess no validity unless accompanied by effective power and action. In addition to discursive criticism, Timur justified certain military campaigns by invoking the “protection of pilgrims,” thereby seeking to portray himself as the “practical protector” of Islam’s sacred centers. In 1386–1387, for example, he campaigned in Luristan, claiming that he sought to end attacks by local groups against pilgrims traveling to the House of God and punish highway robbers operating along the route to the Hijaz (10, 30). He also circulated exaggerated accounts of his execution of those who obstructed the Hijaz routes and secured the route through Arab Iraq for pilgrimage caravans (20). The justification for his campaign in Azerbaijan was similar: the stated pretext was to protect the pilgrimage route from Qara Yusuf of the Turkmen confederation (8). It should be emphasized cautiously that the principal motivation behind these campaigns was unlikely to have been exclusively the “protection of pilgrims.” Such claims were probably advanced alongside other political and military objectives, including territorial expansion, the weakening of local rivals, and the acquisition of financial resources. Nevertheless, what matters for the analysis of cultural diplomacy and soft power is Timur’s “use of the discourse of pilgrimage” as an instrument of legitimation, regardless of whether this motivation was genuine or served as a pretext for conquest. In addition to military action and discursive claims, Timur paid particular attention to financing and developing the Two Holy Sanctuaries, a dimension of his strategy that may be described as “financial-devotional diplomacy.” He endowed a portion of the fertile lands of Andkhoy near Balkh to the Two Holy Sanctuaries so that their revenues would be used for the maintenance and development of Mecca and Medina (10, 11). This endowment was not merely a one-time symbolic act but appears to have constituted an enduring institutional arrangement. Sources indicate that Timurid decrees consistently referred to the province of Andkhoy as an “endowment of the Two Holy Sanctuaries” and that representatives of the sanctuaries traveled annually to Samarkand to receive its revenues (31, 32). Timur also maintained relations with religious elites from Mecca. Sayyid Baraka, one of Mecca’s prominent figures, was assigned to oversee the revenues of the endowments of the Two Holy Sanctuaries and entered Timur’s circle of attendants (10, 11). This connection exceeded a simple administrative relationship and may be interpreted as an example of “elite diplomacy” within the framework of soft power. The presence of a Meccan religious scholar at Timur’s court conveyed a symbolic message to the Islamic world: “The spiritual center of Islam, Mecca, has sent its representative to Timur’s court.” Without requiring any formal declaration, this message strengthened Timur’s legitimacy within the civilizational imagination of the Islamic world. Overall, although the pilgrimage itself was not a direct object of military conflict between Timur and the Ottomans, it may be regarded as one of the “hidden arenas of soft-power competition” between the two powers. By proclaiming the “revival of Islam,” challenging the legitimacy of the Mamluks who claimed the title “Sultan of the Two Holy Sanctuaries,” launching campaigns under the pretext of protecting pilgrims, establishing endowments for the sanctuaries, and cultivating relations with Meccan elites, Timur effectively conveyed to his rivals, including Bayezid, that service to the holy places was not limited to geographical proximity and that any ruler, even one based in distant Samarkand, could through effective action present himself as a more committed “custodian” and “protector” than neighboring sultans. The Ottoman Empire occupied a special position in this context for several reasons. Ottoman territory controlled major pilgrimage routes from the north and west, and Bayezid, like Timur, styled himself as a ghazi and defender of Islam and used this title to legitimize his campaigns in the Balkans. Timur’s

letter to Bayezid, in which he described the Mamluks as weak, may also be interpreted as a step toward the discursive discrediting of the Ottoman ruler, for its indirect message was: “If the Mamluks are unworthy of the title ‘Sultan of the Two Holy Sanctuaries’ because of their weakness, you too will suffer the same fate if you are unable to protect pilgrims within your territory.” The pilgrimage thus became an arena of competition between Timur and the Ottomans in the production of legitimacy. Through visible commitment to Islam’s sacred sites, Timur sought to increase his attractiveness within the Islamic civilizational sphere and marginalize the Ottoman Empire.

Conclusion

By analyzing the components of Timur’s cultural strategy in competition with the Ottoman Empire, the present study concludes that Timur should be regarded as an “architect of cultural legitimation” in the Islamic world of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The findings demonstrate that Timur’s cultural strategy rested on four principal dimensions.

First, Timur appropriated the symbolic capital of his rival through the forced relocation of scientific and religious elites. By transferring prominent scholars such as Shaykh Shams al-Din Muhammad al-Jazari, formerly an attendant of the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid, and Muhammad Zahid al-Bukhari to Samarkand, Timur not only disrupted the chain through which intellectual legitimacy was reproduced in Ottoman territory, but also transformed Samarkand into a repository of the collective intellectual resources of the Islamic world. This action constitutes an example of “offensive soft power,” in which the enhancement of one’s own attractiveness is pursued by reducing that of the rival.

Second, Timur pursued an offensive form of Sufi diplomacy. By securing the support of Khwaja Ali al-Safavi, whose network of disciples extended throughout Ottoman Anatolia, he effectively obtained the “seal of approval” of a transregional spiritual authority for his government. Without explicitly naming the Ottoman Empire, this encounter conveyed to Muslim society that “the spiritual pole of this part of the world stands with Timur, not Bayezid.” By granting tax exemptions to the Safavid family and releasing Ottoman captives at Khwaja Ali’s request, Timur demonstrated that he understood hard and soft power as complementary: conquest through the sword and consolidation through the saint’s charisma.

Third, Timur materially and symbolically reconstructed Samarkand as the new center of Islamic civilization. By transferring artists, architects, and craftsmen from conquered territories, including the Ottoman domain, constructing monumental mosques and palaces, and naming villages around Samarkand after major cities such as Damascus and Baghdad, he established a form of “silent cultural hegemony.” The display of these structures to foreign ambassadors, as reported by Clavijo, activated attraction rather than coercion. The astonished ambassador unintentionally became a promoter of Timur’s grandeur at his own court.

Fourth, Timur used pilgrimage diplomacy as a hidden arena of soft-power competition. By endowing the fertile lands of Andkhoy to the Two Holy Sanctuaries, protecting pilgrimage caravans, launching campaigns under the pretext of ending attacks by highway robbers, and establishing relationships with Meccan elites such as Sayyid Baraka, Timur portrayed himself as a more committed “custodian” and “protector” than rivals geographically closer to Mecca. His letter to Bayezid conveyed an indirect message to the Ottoman ruler: if you cannot protect pilgrims, you too are unworthy of presenting yourself as a legitimate claimant to Islamic leadership.

Overall, the principal conclusion of this study is that Timur’s cultural strategy in competition with the Ottoman Empire constituted a “systematic engineering of the rival’s intellectual weakening and the reproduction of legitimacy

in his own favor.” Timur demonstrated that, in competition among great powers, the conquest of minds through cultural and spiritual attraction is ultimately more effective than the conquest of fortresses through hard power.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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