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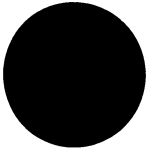
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## Uzbekistan In the Shadow of Tamerlane *Kenneth Weisbrode*

On a recent tour of Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, my young Persian-featured interpreter proudly showed me the city's large, European-style parks, beautiful in early autumn, its newly renovated public buildings, such as the lavish stock exchange and the sprawling, new Indian- and Turkish-built hotels, and a bevy of monuments, including the massive, very Soviet memorial to the victims of a 1966 earthquake that destroyed much of the city. Although she took me to the most significant mosques and madrasahs, she was very surprised by my interest in the rundown, winding streets of the Old City. She was even more astounded by my attraction to the huge, teeming bazaars, despite their blaring Western music (including the macarena).

Her careful English and Gucci handbag betrayed her cultural sympathies, although she was full of what she considered useful information: the population of Tashkent is 2.5 million; Uzbekistan is the seventh largest source of gold in the world and has important supplies of uranium; it is the second largest producer of cotton; it is the most populous country of Central Asia and the site of its most historic cities.

Uzbekistan proclaimed its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but its current boundaries date to the map drawn by a Soviet border commission in 1924. Bounded on the north by Kazakhstan, on the east by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and on the southwest by Turkmenistan, it is the only Central Asian state that has a common frontier with all the others but not with Russia. Its "centrality" has led some geopolitically

sensitive commentators to suspect that Uzbekistan has ambitions to replace Russia as big brother to its neighboring states.

The Uzbeks (the more accurate term, Uzbekistanis, is rarely used) frequently make mention of their "burden" as a regional anchor. They control the east-west access to key water supplies, even though the headwaters lie beyond their territory. They also control vital natural gas routes to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and provide electricity to northern Afghanistan.

Much as Russia has done, Uzbekistan has begun to trade guaranteed access to natural resources for future debt payments. In one instance a few years ago, the Uzbeks cut off energy supplies to Kyrgyzstan because of unpaid bills, leading some in the Kyrgyz government to contemplate retaliation by cutting off the flow of water to Uzbekistan. But the thought did not last long and wiser heads in Kyrgyzstan prevailed.

### *The Good versus the Best*

Uzbekistan's government is led by former Communist Party first secretary Islam Karimov, who maintains tight political control but who has proceeded cautiously with economic reform. The U.S. State Department's 1996 human rights report cited Uzbekistan as a "state with limited civil rights" in which "numerous, serious human rights abuses" continue to be a problem.<sup>1</sup> Recently, Uzbekistan began a modest privatization program, most notably in the mining sector, and it is just beginning to take measures to comply with the requirements for fiscal discipline and monetary reform of the

International Monetary Fund, with whom it took longer to cooperate than the other Central Asian states. The Uzbeks also were slower to introduce their own currency, the som, although now they take great pride in pointing out that it is the only Central Asian currency minted locally. The markets in the cities are bursting with goods and produce, and certain sectors of the economy, such as mining and light manufacturing, are prospering. The government, meanwhile, does not cease to remind visitors that this year Uzbekistan became entirely self-sufficient in food production and soon will be so in energy.

Despite these achievements, one hears the occasional murmur of impending trouble. Uzbekistan's population is overwhelmingly young, and the prospects for large-scale labor market growth are slim given the extensive soil erosion throughout the countryside, which is leading to declining yields of the country's mainstay, cotton. The government does not admit to great concern over the demographic and environmental challenges it faces. And in any event, its *dirigiste* style means that the only changes to be made will be those for which the country is deemed ready.

As with economic reform, the watchword for political change is "constructive." Soon after independence, the government sent the leaders of two major opposition groups, the Birlik and Erk parties, into exile, claiming that once they ceased arguing among themselves, they would destabilize the nascent Uzbek polity by inviting in meddlers from neighboring countries—a move interpreted by many as an attempt to thwart any inroads by political Islam. The government is especially wary of efforts to organize along ethnic or religious lines.

It is for this reason that cultivating a national loyalty that subordinates parochial allegiances is so important to Uzbekistan's leaders, and why they have invested such energy in reformulating a new set of powerfully transcendent symbols and traditions.

As with economic and political reform, the ends of cultural programs are intended to justify the means.

More recently, President Karimov has made more positive gestures, assuring his critics that Uzbekistan has overcome its initial hurdles and can now afford a small increment of political freedom, including an amnesty for some political prisoners. He has permitted a well-known human rights activist and the brother of one of the opposition group leaders to return from exile.

Although the authoritarian nature of Uzbek politics is a hindrance to gaining support in the West, the Karimov government makes a powerful case for gradualism. When faced with huge economic and social challenges during a period of tremendous geopolitical flux, one cannot take too many bold steps, Karimov claims. The Uzbeks say they are wiser for having learned by example rather than experience and, pointing to Kyrgyzstan's economic troubles and Tajikistan's political turmoil, they recall the maxim: the best is often the enemy of the good.

#### *Tashkent's Giant Makeover*

This does not apply, however, to the physical reconstruction of the country, especially the capital city. Tashkent is in the midst of a giant makeover. Although the wide avenues patrolled by freshly uniformed police, the sleek, modern subways, and the general sense of order recall the Soviet past, the Uzbeks are rapidly replacing the concrete block high-rises of the Soviet era with tan-colored brick buildings, whose arches and domes are designed to lend them a more Eastern appearance.

Tashkent existed as a small settlement for several centuries before the Russians conquered it in 1865. It only emerged as an urban center during the mid-twentieth century, largely due to forced migration from other parts of the Soviet Union, especially from the Caucasus and Volga regions, and to the industrial buildup prior to the Second World War.

The 1966 earthquake leveled many buildings and left a majority of the city's inhabitants homeless. The Russians launched a massive reconstruction effort designed to make Tashkent the symbol of a perfect socialist metropolis and Soviet capital; the result was a sprawling city that at first seems to have little in the way of linear logic. Taxi rides last forever and seem to go in circles, major buildings seem to be miles apart from one another. During the day, most streets are lively: Ladas, Daewoos, and Mercedes race along and the sidewalks are full of purposeful-looking pedestrians. But after sundown, things are as dead as the surrounding desert.

Tashkent would appear to be a Western entrepreneur's dream: there are no movie theaters, department stores, or outdoor cafés. These are sure to emerge in time (a few discos have opened recently), but for now the only entertainment option seems to be the amusement park near the giant television tower, or the Tashkent opera house.

I tried the latter, happily confident that my one-dollar ticket for a second-row seat was a real bargain for what was advertised as an operatic commemoration of the life of Amir Timur, better known in the West as Tamerlane, the fourteenth-century conqueror who has been adopted by the Uzbeks as a national cultural hero. I sat between some friendly German women and a large group of less friendly Chinese, but the opera turned out to be a ballet about Don Quixote and the dancers far from Bolshoi standards, even though most looked Russian. It was the first ballet I had seen that featured a (seemingly unintentional) collision on stage.

Other aspects of change strike the visitor. Roman letters are gradually taking the place of the Cyrillic on street signs and building entrances; English words appear on government buildings and hotels. Where there was once a shrine to Lenin, there is Independence Square and a giant bronze globe. The Lenin museum has become the national Uzbek museum, which is surprisingly comprehensive and features a great

mural in the entry that depicts several centuries of "Uzbek" history, complete with a portrait of President Karimov at the top. And where there was once a large statue of Karl Marx stands a newly cast monument to Tamerlane, exuberant on horseback, charging off to conquer foreign lands.

#### *Tamerlane's Legacy*

Tamerlane was one of the most imposing conquerors in history, but somehow he has not enjoyed as epic a reputation in the West as Genghis Khan, Attila, or Alexander the Great. His armies dealt the final blow to the most powerful Mongol empire of the time, the Golden Horde, freeing up an embattled Muscovy to pursue greater ambitions; sacked Delhi, Damascus, Baghdad, and most of Persia; brought into subservience the Mamelukes of Syria and Egypt and the theretofore irrepressible mountain tribes of the Caucasus; and even put the formidable Ottoman sultan, Bayazid I, in a cage, thereby postponing Byzantium's inevitable fall by nearly half a century. China alone was spared Tamerlane's onslaught, but only because he died in the saddle at the age of 74 on his way to win this treasure and supplant Genghis Khan, his purported ancestor, as the greatest emir Eurasia has ever known.

Tamerlane was born in 1336 into a modest but locally respected Turkic-Tatar clan, the Barlas, in a small village in Transoxiana (roughly where Uzbekistan and Tajikistan lie today). Through cunning, amazing intelligence, and historical luck, he rose to dominate a series of alliances that placed him at the fulcrum of the tribal balance of power.

It was then that he shrewdly promoted the mythology of a Mongol ancestry and coopted the local Mongol aristocracy into nominal rule over his newly won territory. Somehow cognizant of his destiny, he wasted little time in eliminating outside threats to his empire, which led him to a military career that extended over half a century and covered most of the territory between the Bosphorus and the Great Wall of China.

Apart from his military success, why do the Uzbeks now consider it so important to celebrate the legacy of a fourteenth-century conqueror who is perceived by most outside the region, rightly or wrongly, as a brutal warlord and pillager of civilizations? Even Christopher Marlowe, who first popularized the legend of Tamerlane among English readers, was more captivated by the pillars of skulls and burning flesh that were the products of his conquests than by Tamerlane's positive achievements.

The rediscovery of Tamerlane began in 1962, after the publication of Hilda Hookham's superb *Tamburlaine, the Conqueror*, the first work to offer a more balanced view of his legacy. It is still a widely read book—in English—in Uzbekistan. After enduring so many decades of Soviet revisionism, the Uzbeks, in their search for a national history and ideology, have seized upon Tamerlane, and have taken it upon themselves to recast his memory in a better light. They emphasize his military genius, his love for beautiful architecture, art, and music, and his intellect (he challenged the most learned men of the day, including the famous scholar Ibn Khaldun, who conceded victory to the illiterate Tamerlane in a theological debate that lasted several days).

This past autumn's 660th anniversary of Tamerlane's birth was marked by a week of festivities, which included an academic conference, banquets, speeches, and ceremonies to dedicate new monuments. Invited guests included not only scholars, but also six heads of state from neighboring Turkic countries and cultural figures of all stripes. As a participant in and observer of these events, I was treated to an extraordinary view of a national culture in the making.

### *The Genesis of a Eurasian Nationalism*

Central Asia is a patchwork of cultures. One guide in Samarkand remarked that there are some 105 ethnic groups in Uzbekistan, including direct descendants of Tamerlane's Barlas. Sedentary cultures live alongside his-

torically nomadic ones; Persian and Turkic faces mix with Mongolian and Chinese; numerous strands of Islam coexist with Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The political maps of the region have only recently been defined along ethnic lines, with Uzbekistan for Uzbeks, Kazakstan for Kazaks, Kyrgyzstan for Kyrgyz, Turkmenistan for Turkmen, Tajikistan for Tajiks, Azerbaijan for Azeris, and so on.

But not a single one of these states possesses anything resembling ethnic homogeneity; some barely have an ethnic majority. However, tribal warfare does not seem to be the wave of the future, despite what many outsiders have predicted. The Tajiks in Uzbekistan are about as likely to start a secessionist movement to join their brethren in Tajikistan as the Franco-Americans in New England will fight to join Quebec.

Ethnic division is at the center of the evolving geopolitics of this region, but not in the way that many in the West, still unconsciously steeped in Greco-Roman history, not to mention the legacy of Westphalia, like to believe. Ethnicity will not drive interstate conflict. Instead, emerging national interests will drive ethnic consolidation or redefinition in ways not wholly consistent with the current territorial distribution of ethnic groups. To understand why, it helps to look back to the ways of Tamerlane.

There is a notion, abetted by ethnic chauvinists in many countries, that the melting pot of Central Asia is really "Stalin's bazaar," as Henry Kissinger put it in his widely read book, *Diplomacy*. There is no doubt that the Soviets moved large groups of people every which way (somewhere around 3 percent of Uzbekistan's population is Korean, for example). But people have been moving, or have been moved, for centuries, with territorial power evolving over time as a function of their movement.

Few surpassed Tamerlane's ability to divide, conquer, manipulate, and unite people and regions, hence the relevance of his success to modern-day Central Asia. He did not

impose rule over groups from the outside, as Alexander, Genghis Khan, or, later, the British and Russians did. He connived and balanced from within. The last great nomadic conqueror, he was also responsible for building striking urban settlements in Central Asia. He was the first to fuse the Mongol warrior tradition with the passion of the Islamic crusade. He built a multinational empire by using whatever strands of legitimacy he could and, as the Uzbeks like to say, "integrated" the region into a world actor that was able to influence events throughout Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

### *The Restoration*

Uzbeks take legitimate pride in this achievement. Nowhere is this more clear than in Samarkand, where my hosts took me to see the remains of Tamerlane's glorious capital. Samarkand, the second-largest city in the country, is full of modern buildings and new monuments, its shady avenues bustling with traffic. The Registan, the traditional center of the city where Tamerlane presided, is a square of awesome proportions surrounded by sparkling gold and turquoise-tiled buildings.

We arrived just as several hundred performers were rehearsing for a visit by the six heads of state the next day. This became a problem when we asked to see Tamerlane's tomb, said to be covered by the largest piece of jade in the world. An insolent guard told us the tomb was closed because workers were preparing for the celebrations. An order was an order. No threats or pleading could move him, including an appeal from the provincial governor, who was a close friend of our guide. Thus, the Soviet legacy persists and occasionally bares its teeth.

The most impressive site in Samarkand is not the Registan, however, nor the majestic Bibi Khanum mosque that Tamerlane built for his Chinese wife. It is the Shah-i Zinda cemetery, which sits quietly on a hill near the center of the city. The graves are marked by exquisite tilework and engrav-

ings, each supposedly identifiable by its pattern as the artistry of exiles from throughout the empire. Tamerlane often spared the lives of the artisans and poets of the lands he conquered, shipping them en masse to Samarkand to enhance his magnificent city. The results are still evident, and no more so than in this cemetery, which has graves dating from the tenth century, including one of a cousin of Mohammed that to this day is an important pilgrimage site.

In the Shah-i Zinda are small traces of what has already overtaken much of Samarkand and Khiva and is rapidly making its way to Bukhara and other important historical sites. The Uzbeks, as they have done for centuries, uphold a literal notion of restoration. That is, they restore their monuments to reflect what they think was their original appearance, much to the horror of Western experts whose ideal ruin is the Roman Coliseum, not Colonial Williamsburg.

Novice observers are astounded at the state of preservation of many monuments, until they look closely and notice the slightly different shades of brick and unusual interruptions in generally linear patterns of design that reveal the restorer's hand. UNESCO and other sponsors have invested great energies in Uzbekistan and have had some praiseworthy success in working with local authorities to preserve the most important relics. But nothing can match the enthusiasm of the Uzbeks to restore, rather than to preserve, the remains of their grandest monuments. They are out to impress the world and are doing so with tremendous speed, quoting all the while Tamerlane's dictum that the most important duty of the wise ruler is to construct beautiful and lasting buildings.

Next year is the official 2,500th anniversary of Bukhara, and major restoration is planned, so I set out to see the legendary city before most of this work begins. Arriving there was nothing short of stepping back in time; the contrast to Samarkand and Tashkent is striking. Bukhara was once the

capital of a great khanate that extended over much of Transoxiana and what is now northern Afghanistan. It was, as British diplomat Sir Fitzroy Maclean described it in 1949, "Bokhara the noble...a center of Mohammedan civilization, a holy city with a hundred mosques, three hundred places of learning, and the richest bazaar in Central Asia." The Soviets decided it was best to neglect this place rather than to destroy or conform to it. Thus, the city still looks very much as it has for a very long time: it is dusty, intimate, and indescribably fascinating.

The most memorable and unexpected part of my visit took place when I was touring the Ark, or palace of the emir (which once housed over 3,000 officials, their relatives, and miscellaneous others). A boy who spoke very good English asked if I wanted to see a unique view. Thinking he was about to sell a picture book, I was wary, but he told me to follow him, opened a locked gate, and walked into an enormous ruins that looked as if it covered over two-thirds of the entire area of the Ark (a later glance at an aerial photograph confirmed this). We spent over an hour picking through pieces of pottery and tile, looking at the various angles of the city, inspecting ancient engravings in walls now also covered with new graffiti. Broken bottles were everywhere.

#### *A "Usable" Past*

The contrast between the antiquated Bukhara presented as an old secret by its young inhabitant and the shiny pageantry of Samarkand leads one to wonder how this place might evolve. Western observers tend to ascribe the Uzbeks' cultural pride to a pent-up identity whose expression was frustrated during colonial and then Soviet rule. Uzbekistan's neighbors tend to attribute it to unfair and dangerous chauvinism. But, simply put, Uzbekistan is a small country that considers itself underappreciated and destined for a higher role in the world. Much like the young Tamerlane, it has an instinct for windows of opportunity and valuable assets.

I was reminded of such movements of cultural nationalism as the Risorgimento, Kemalism, the Kulturkampf, and others that emerged in Europe and the Americas, mostly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during periods of imperial decay under innovative blends of previously suppressed, or unexploited, allegiances. The Uzbeks have found what Nietzsche once described as a "usable past," and they seem to know what to do with it.

Their ambition is to become regional potentates in their own right, to be the deal-makers and peacekeepers they once were under Tamerlane. Like his empire's, Uzbekistan's population is far from homogenous, but its citizens' determination and love of country are strong. Their focus is, as it was then, on achieving success and prosperity and the promise of future greatness.

As in the American experiment, this fusion of patriotism and nationalism has proved quite powerful. But unlike the United States, Uzbekistan exists in a dangerous neighborhood where patriotism, even if it transcends ethnicity—as it necessarily must—depends increasingly on promoting rivalries with one's neighbors.

To those prophets whose fears focus on a return of Russian imperialism or a wave of Islamic fundamentalism this might come as a surprise. Central Asia may be characterized first by growing *national* competition of the European variety, competition that will subsume or orchestrate ethnic and religious differences, rather than the other way around.

The rest of my visit was spent in official meetings and at the commemorating conference, at which President Karimov delivered a serious speech on the importance of Tamerlane's legacy for Uzbekistan. A passionate and eloquent address was then given by a famous Kyrgyz writer, Chinghiz Aimatov, about the destiny of Central Asia. During most of the speeches, I sat next to a bright-eyed 17-year-old girl who asked me if I believed in God and then proceeded to tell me how much she loved humanity and hoped

that all people in the world could get along. She was a quarter Turkish, and her name in Uzbek meant “princess” because, she said, her grandfather was the last king of Khorezm.

She appeared more cosmopolitan than most of the other Uzbeks I had met and therefore, I thought, might be capable of seeing things from a more objective angle. I prodded her to characterize the state of her country and the thinking of her fellow Uzbeks. She said that most in her generation are proud of their country and “our leader, in whom we have tremendous faith.” She acknowledged the impression that Americans do not have much faith in their own leader, which she said was unfortunate because no great nation can succeed without such conviction. She added that most Uzbeks are optimistic about their future and hope to improve their standing among other countries.

When I asked about the attitudes of Uzbeks toward their neighbors, she replied that they do not mind most of the other Central Asian states, dislike but tolerate (as well as secretly respect) the Russians, have very little contact with Iran, and greatly dislike the Chinese. The last remark surprised me, so I asked whom the Uzbeks admired. She said no doubt they look most highly upon Arabs, especially Egyptians, who “appear as Gods to us when they visit our country.” She then added Indians, Americans, and Europeans, in that order.

She could not pass judgment on the Turks, she said, because of her parentage, but thought that most of her countrymen disdain them as greedy and less civilized than themselves. Many Uzbeks I met seem to resent what they perceive to be a patronizing and unproductive attitude among the Turkish businessmen and officials who arrived soon after independence. As a prominent Tatar member of the government put it, “When the Turks offered their country as a window to the West, we responded that we prefer entering through the door.”

I thought her judgments, especially her great admiration for the Middle East, were strange but instructive, knowing that she was a self-appointed member of her country’s elite. Even though this “survey” of Uzbek opinion was idiosyncratic to say the least, her views were bolstered by the demographics of the conference: there was only one Iranian scheduled to speak (who never arrived) and one Russian. The Chinese delegates were furious that they were not invited to sit on the dais and were accommodated only after great disruption.

The rest of the participants were, in decreasing order, Uzbeks; fellow Muslims, including Egyptians, Pakistanis, Turks, and Malaysians; then Indians, Europeans (mostly French, probably because of UNESCO’s sponsorship of the conference), other Central Asians, Americans, and Japanese. Noticeably, the Egyptian delegation had been seated at the center of the front row.

The conference culminated in a visit to the new Tamerlane museum, a hugely extravagant marbled and gilded building near the new Tamerlane monument. In the center of its lobby was an enormous chandelier, surrounded by murals of Central Asian history. The only interesting material was on the second floor—old armor, pottery, maps. The rest of the museum consisted of plush conference rooms, grand hallways, and one giant staircase. Once again, I recalled Tamerlane’s dictum about beautiful buildings.

#### *The “Fortunate Conjunction”*

A connection between the worship of an idealized past and present circumstances in Uzbekistan can be drawn by recalling a title purportedly bestowed upon Tamerlane at the time of his birth by a visionary kinsman—“Lord of the Fortunate Conjunction.” The epithet referred to a certain astrological pattern that occurs once every thousand years, but it lends itself to additional interpretations. Tamerlane aligned the internal organization of his empire with his larger strategic goals, namely, the preservation of



tribal harmony through the reinforced domination of outside competitors along the gradient that transits the region's political, ethnic, and cultural borderlands from north to south and from east to west. At the center was magnificent Samarkand—the perfect microcosm of Tamerlane's conquests, tastes, and ambitions. Around the periphery stood his vassals, dependencies, and other empires that were, to varying degrees, affected by his movements.

Without taxing the imagination, it is possible to draw another parallel between Tamerlane's empire and today's Uzbekistan, which is confronted with its own unique conjunction. Just as Tamerlane brilliantly exploited a strategic vacuum by transforming an unstable set of tribal rivalries into a powerful military force, Uzbekistan seeks to introduce a new political order into the existential space left by a weakened Russia, a chastened Iran, and a cautious China. At once independently endowed with the richest and most concentrated population in Central Asia, it is now striking out in every direction with a similar strategy, though with tactics happily different from those of Tamerlane. Its goal is to reposition itself to fulfill what it considers to be its natural destiny at the center of the Eurasian balance of power.

What other nation is better placed to serve as a neutral bridge between the Islamic world and the West, Russia and the weaker Central Asian republics, the region's suppliers of natural resources and the vast new markets in India, Pakistan, and China? The Uzbeks are quick to argue that all other pretenders are compromised, illogical, or undesirable. Uzbekistan's leaders are defining a new role for the next millennium; now, they believe, the world must ready itself to witness its reification.

In a recent speech in Washington, the Uzbek ambassador evoked the image of Tamerlane to stake out his country's claim

as the pivotal state in the region. Reminding the audience that Uzbekistan is not only the home of algebra, the Bactrian camel, and the Silk Road but also the birthplace of Tamerlane and his grandson, the legendary Ulug Bek, an astronomer whose maps of the heavens surpassed those of Galileo and Copernicus, the ambassador set the stage to make a larger point. Blatant expressions of cultural pride alone do not define status, he acknowledged. As a new nation, Uzbekistan must be careful to avoid the pitfalls of *atimia*, the disease of obsession with past greatness common to some Argentines, Lithuanians, Britons, Ghanaians, or any number of lesser inheritors of former empires.

The Uzbeks, he asserted, have not raised the figure of Tamerlane to boost a wounded national ego or to compensate for a less pragmatic ambition. Instead, they are recreating their history to act as a springboard to a more prominent future. Recalling the past merely serves as a wake-up call. As Tamerlane himself declared, "By experience it is known unto me, that victory over foe proceedeth not from the greatness of armies, nor defeat from inferiority of numbers; for conquest is obtained by the Divine Favor, and by skillful and judicious measures."<sup>2</sup>

The fate of states in the world often can be boiled down to simple organization and will. Uzbekistan may or may not take its place alongside the great regional powers, and the attempt no doubt will rub some of its neighbors the wrong way. Nonetheless, the resilience and the savvy of the citizens of this new state with an old culture bode well for Uzbekistan. ●

#### Notes

1. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "1996 Human Rights Report: Uzbekistan," January 30, 1997.

2. Karimbek Hasan, ed., *Institutes of Timur* (Tashkent, 1996), p. 137.