

That Other Exchange between Timur the Scourge of God and ibn Khaldûn

by strannikov

Neither caliph nor khan, Timur the Conqueror lounged in modest comfort in his black tent, his field headquarters until the siege of Damascus ended, which now could be but hours away: most of the Mamluk army had retreated safely, and negotiations with the Mamluk delegation were about to begin.

The chief Mamluk emissary was a very able scholar, Timur had learned, a refugee from Umayyad al-Andalus who from all his labors should be well informed on conditions prevailing across North Africa and across the whole of Iberia. Along with the surrender of Damascus, Timur would be soliciting from this man a detailed report on the state of the Maghreb.

The esteemed ibn Khaldûn—historiographer, diplomat, jurist—was ushered in with due respect and courtesy, in mild contrast to his having to be lowered over the walls of Damascus just to attend this audience. The side of the black tent he entered was deserted but for a Moor and a Turk loading two hookahs from two small bricks of golden hashish as if for a day of reverie and diversion and wild laughter. At this ibn Khaldûn marveled: could it be that this Mongolian . . . conqueror was adopting habits widely imputed to the Nizari Ismailis? Hadn't Timur himself been killing and scattering the Ismailis across Asia just like everyone else his hordes overtook?

Just before the Mamluk army's retreat from Damascus, ibn Khaldûn had learned of the new tower that Timur lately built just outside of Aleppo with the skulls of some twenty thousand former

inhabitants. The scholar was able to maintain his composure on this delicate mission, though, because should negotiations somehow fail, he himself would surely wind up in the collection of artists and scholars that Timur had assembled from across Asia in his capital of Samarkand.

—You have never met one man more to be feared, the Mamluk commander had also counseled ibn Khaldûn before returning south with his anxious army. Even though Timur was not known ever to refer to himself in such terms, the commander had learned that the epithet “scourge of God” in address to the conqueror of Asia would relieve any oppressiveness lurking in his mood.

Timur was brought in, carried aloft by the Moor, the Turk, and two others. He was seated on a richly stuffed divan, so plush that ibn Khaldûn could not estimate at first just how tall this fearsome conqueror might be. Gently the couch was lowered atop a thick pile of carpets. The Moor and the Turk then placed two small lamps and plates of wicks near the two hookahs and retreated with the other two to invisible posts behind the wall of hanging swaying carpets.

—Have you enough to smoke, scholar?

—Thanks to your considerate generosity, O Scourge of God!

Timur and ibn Khaldûn both laughed loud and long, hard enough to bare gleaming teeth. The Sword of God had to twist to one side finally to stifle his snickering, ibn Khaldûn had managed to stifle his own guffaws earlier but continued snickering with finesse until this marauder ended his own laughing fit. As Timur regained composure, he waved an arm at the hookahs.

—They tell me this is from the Hindu Kush, but someone I think is trying to butter me up with flavors even sweeter, from Persia, to pamper my tongue.

With a bare mouthful of the aromatic smoke barely lodged in his throat, ibn Khaldûn's head was suddenly and inexplicably filled with the phrase “pampered jade of Asia”. Where could that

have come from? So struck, he held the stem of the hookah blankly and stared at the gently rocking wall of carpets. Worse, he stopped breathing long enough to begin rocking himself, when Timur observed the change.

—Too much too quick, scholar?

Only with effort could ibn Khaldûn suppress the phrase clanging in his ears.

—Oh, mercy, yes, O Scourge of God! Whatever the provenance, I would be so bold to commend procuring as ample a supply as possible, since an amount scarce enough to fill a small yurt must surely last for a life of any blessed length!

Timur clapped his hands once then continued.

—Now for the matter concerning my summons . . .

Fresh perspiration beaded on ibn Khaldûn's brow as his brain began screaming inside his skull: "PAMPERED JADE OF ASIA! PAMPERED JADE OF ASIA!" The phrase now threatened to leap from his ears into his mouth.

Timur cocked his head to wonder whether his guest was having a stroke.

-END-

