

**Handout 18: Raiding the reading – Ulug’bek and the Conquest of the Stars**

Why is it that a man who accurately plotted the movement of the stars as long ago as 1437, is largely ignored by the West?

Ulug’bek, the grandson of the great conqueror Tamburlaine, was born in Afghanistan in 1394. Inspired by his teacher, Kazi Zade Rumi, he became interested in astronomy. By the age of 34, he had built an observatory in Samarkand – the best equipped anywhere in the medieval world. Nine years later, in 1437, he constructed a star catalogue detailing the accurate positions of 992 stars.

‘Where knowledge starts, religion ends’, was Kazi Zade Rumi’s motto. Ideas like this led to Ulug’bek’s untimely death. Because his findings conflicted with religious beliefs, he was assassinated on 29 October 1449. Shortly after his beheading, his observatory was destroyed by religious fanatics. Fortunately, one astronomer escaped with the star catalogue; a copy of which was discovered in Oxford’s Bodleian Library in 1648.

In 1908, over four hundred and fifty years after the destruction of his observatory, a Russian amateur archaeologist unearthed a giant sextant on the edge of Samarkand. This was one of the major finds of the twentieth century. Now, next to the sextant, is Ulug’bek’s memorial fittingly inscribed, ‘Religion disperses like a fog, kingdoms perish but the works of scholars remain for an eternity’, his comment that had so infuriated his opponents: Ulug’bek’s findings have lasted for nearly 500 years.