



MAḤMUD B. SEBÜKTEGIN

MAḤMUD B. SEBÜKTEGIN, YAMIN-AL-DAWLA ABU'L-QĀSEM, the first fully independent ruler of the Turkish Ghaznavid dynasty (see [GHAZNAVIDS](#)), who reigned (388-421/998-1030) over what had become by his death a vast military empire stretching from northwestern Persia to the Punjab in India and from K̲v̲ārazm ([Chorasmia](#)) and the middle stretches of the Oxus River to Makrān and the Arabian Sea shores.

On the maternal side, he was the eldest grandson of a landowner of Zābolestān in eastern Afghanistan (hence the name given to him by some of his poetic eulogists of “Maḥmud-e Zāvoli”) of the Turkish slave (*gōlām*) commander [Sebüktegin](#). Sebüktegin had risen in the slave guard of the Samanid amirs, through the patronage of his master [Alptigin](#), to become by his death in 387/997 the virtually independent ruler in Ghazna of a principality extending over eastern and southern Afghanistan and the Kabul River valley, while still acknowledging the theoretical suzerainty of his ancient masters, the Samanids of Bukhara, who were by then in palpable decline. Maḥmud had already been involved in the confused struggle for power in the Samanid lands during his father's lifetime, when ambitious commanders like [Fā'eḳ Kāṣṣa](#) and the Khorasanian landowner Abu 'Ali Simjuri [see [SIMJURIDS](#)] challenged the power of the [Samanid Amir Nuḥ II b. Maṣṣur I](#). In 384-85/994-95 Maḥmud had campaigned in Khorasan at his father's side against the rebellious generals, and as reward he had been made commander-in-chief of the Samanid army of Khorasan by Amir Nuḥ (Barthold, 1969, pp. 261-62; Nāẓim, pp. 36-37). He had also been awarded the honorific title of Sayf-al-Dawla (the first of several titles



he was to acquire in the course of his reign; see Bosworth, 1962a, pp. 215-17).

Maḥmud was thus well placed, from his military backing and experience in warfare, to assert his right to succeed his father over all his territories, and not just in Khorasan, when the latter died in 387/997. From motives which are unclear, Sebüktegin designated a younger son, Esmā'il, as his heir in Ghazna (possibly because Esmā'il's mother had been a daughter of his old master Alptigin; regarding Sebüktegin's possible motivation, see Bosworth, 1963a). But with the support of another brother, Abu'l-Moẓaffar Naṣr, governor at Bost, Maḥmud defeated Esmā'il's forces in a battle outside Ghazna and in 388/998 ascended the throne as unchallenged ruler ('Otbi, tr., pp. 158-65; Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 130-31).

Now firmly in power, Maḥmud turned against the Samanid slave commander [Begtuzun](#), who had taken over Khorasan while Maḥmud was engaged in the succession war with his brother Esmā'il. He ejected Begtuzun from Khorasan and then turned against the last Samanids on the pretext of avenging the deposed Amir Nuḥ b. Maṣṣur (r. 976-97; Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 146-47). He could now behave with impunity as an independent monarch, with any allegiance to the Samanids now thrown off, and this status was sealed by his sending an announcement of victory (*fath-nāma*), to the 'Abbasid caliph al-Qāder in Baghdad. In return, the caliph sent him an investiture charter (*manṣur*) for all his territories and awarded him the honorifics of *Yamin-al-Dawla wa Amin-al-Mella* (the first of these becoming the one by which Mahmud was best known, to the extent that later historians such as Juzjāni refer to the Ghaznavid dynasty as the Yaminiya) and that of *Wali* or *Mawlā Amir-al-Mo'menin* ("Friend of the Commander of the Faithful," which hereafter appeared on his coins; Gardizi, ed. Nazim, p. 62; ed. Ḥabibi, p. 175; Ebn al-Jawzi, VIII, p. 53; cf. Bosworth, 1962b, pp. 62-63). Maḥmud is also referred to with the title Sultan (e.g., Bayhaqi, pp. 27, 29, 165-66), but it is noteworthy that this title, while used in Maḥmud's time apparently informally, does not seem to have acquired the status of an official title until later in the dynasty's history, perhaps in reaction to its use by the Great Saljuqs. Historians like [Gardizi](#) (e.g., ed. Ḥabibi, pp. 176 ff.) and [Abu'l-Faẓl Bayhaqi](#) (e.g., pp. 11-12) tend to use the designation Amir in official contexts. The establishment of close and amicable relations with the caliphs, with presents sent from war booty to Baghdad in exchange for titles like these, enabled Maḥmud subsequently to pose as the defender of the moral authority of the 'Abbasid caliphs and of Sunni orthodoxy against distant rivals like the Fatimids of Egypt and nearer ones like the Shi'ite [Buyids](#) and various



Ismaʿili groups on the fringes of the Ghaznavid empire, whom Maḥmud was to pursue as dangerous heretics who should be extirpated (see, on all these topics, Barthold, pp. 266, 271; Nāẓim, 1931, pp. 34-41, 164-65; Bosworth, 1962a, pp. 215-24; idem, 1962b, pp. 54-63).

Maḥmud needed both military and moral support when he faced a formidable enemy in the shape of the Turkish [Ilak-khanids](#), who had invaded Samanid Transoxania from the steppes to the north and, with the occupation of Bukhara in 389/999, had ended the effective dominion of the Samanids. Initially, there were friendly relations between the two powers that had divided up the Samanid lands between themselves, and Maḥmud married a daughter of the Ilak-khanid Arslān Ilak Naṣr b. ʿAli, the so-called Mahd-e Čigil, but relations later deteriorated. The Oxus River had been established as the frontier between the two great powers, but the Ilak's ambitions now extended to the conquest of lands south of the river in Tokārestān and in Khorasan. In 396/1005-6, when Maḥmud was away in India on an expedition against the Ismaʿili ruler in Multan, the Ilak sent armies which captured Balkh and Herat and took over Khorasan, and not until 398/1008 was Maḥmud able to defeat Arslān Ilak and his cousin Qadīr Khan Yusof, hurl them back into Transoxania, and recover Khorasan; the Oxus now became the definitive frontier with the Ilak-khanids for the rest of Maḥmud's reign, with peaceful relations between the two dynasties (ʿOtbi, tr., pp. 280 ff.; Gardizi, ed. Ḥabibi, pp. 178-79; Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 188-89, 191-92; Barthold, pp. 272-74; Nāẓim, pp. 47-52).

The whole of Maḥmud's reign, some thirty-two years, was filled with incessant military campaigning, into infidel India (see below) but also against other Muslim powers in the eastern Iranian lands and their fringes. The result was a vast empire, but one which was only held together by the vitality of its sovereign and which was destined not to endure under his less capable successors. Whilst he lived, however, the Ghaznavid empire was a formidable structure. In the outlying parts of Afghanistan, Maḥmud employed a policy of reducing lesser principalities to tributary status or, in several cases, direct incorporation of those lands into his empire. Thus the Saffarid ruler of Sistān, [Kalaf b. Aḥmad](#) was defeated by a Ghaznavid expedition against Zarang (393/1002-3), and his lands were placed under the governorship of Abu'l-Moẓaffar Naṣr (*Tārik- Sistān*, pp. 352-53; Gardizi, ed. Ḥabibi, p. 177; ʿOtbi, tr., pp. 211-13; Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 172-73; Bosworth, 1994, pp. 321-28). The local rulers of Gowzgān (see [JOWZJĀN](#)) in northern Afghanistan, the Farighunids, had aided Maḥmud in his bid for control of Ghazna in 387/997, and the family



was allowed to retain its power as a tributaries until 401/1010-11, when the Farighunid Abu Naṣr Moḥammad died and Maḥmud's son Moḥammad was installed there as governor (see [ĀL-E FARĪĠŪN](#)). The adjacent principality of [Ġarĉestān](#) was under a line of local princes with the title of Šār, but in 403/1012-13 it was invaded by a Ghaznavid force, the Šār was captured and deposed, and his lands were incorporated into the empire ('Otbi, tr., pp. 327-31). Qoṣḍār in northern Baluchistan had already been made tributary to Sebüktegin, but Ghaznavid authority was in 402/1010-11 more firmly imposed on its recalcitrant ruler, who was forced to pay a large indemnity ('Otbi, tr., pp. 321-22; Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, p. 227). A succession dispute within the local Ma'danid ruling dynasty of [Makrān](#), in coastal Baluchistan, formed the pretext for Maḥmud's intervention there in 416-17/1025-26 in favor of one of the contenders, but by the time of Maḥmud's death, Ghaznavid control there had been thrown off (Bayhaqī, pp. 313-18). Maḥmud was in any case less successful in extending his authority into the inaccessible, mountainous hinterlands of central and northeastern Afghanistan. In Ghur (see [ĠUR](#)), only a temporary submission of the Ghurid chiefs, who resisted fiercely, was achieved by expeditions of 401/1010-11 and 411/1020, and it was not until the reign of Maḥmud's son Mas'ud that some degree of control over Ghur, and the introduction of the Islamic faith there, were achieved (Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 221-22; Bosworth, 1961, pp. 125-28). Similarly, an expedition by Maḥmud in 411/1020 into the Nur and Qirāt valleys running down to Lamḡān and the middle Kabul River valley had no long-term effect. It was to be more than eight centuries later before the Bārakzay Amir 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Khan of Afghanistan could definitively introduce Islam into Kāferestān, then renamed Nurestān "Land of Light" (Gardizi, ed. Ḥabibi, p. 185; Bosworth, in *EI*² IV, 1978, pp. 409-11; on these various campaigns within Afghanistan, see Nāẓim, pp. 67-75, 79-80, 177-78, 186-89).

Beyond the Oxus, Maḥmud was able to achieve a spectacular success by his annexation of the ancient Iranian kingdom of K̲v̲ārazm (see [CHORASMIA](#)). Its rulers, the Ma'munid K̲v̲ārazmšāhs (see [ĀL-E MA'MUN](#)), had at first come within the Samanid sphere of influence, but after the demise of the Samanids they came under the shadow of the Ghaznavids such that Maḥmud had been able to insist that all diplomatic correspondence from the Baghdad caliphs to the Ma'munids should be channeled through his hands (cf. Bayhaqī, p. 908; tr. II, pp. 373-74; Barthold, p. 275). A sister of Maḥmud had married Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Ali b. Ma'mun (I). Marriage connection gave Maḥmud a pretext for intervention when a succession crisis arose in the Khwarazmian capital



Gorgānj. A Ghaznavid army invaded K̲v̲ārazm in 408/1017, ended the Ma'munid line, and began a reign of terror in the land, after which it was entrusted to one of Maḥmud's slave commanders, [Altuntaš](#), with the ancient title of K̲v̲ārazmšāh. K̲v̲ārazm remained isolated from the heartlands of the Ghaznavid empire and was to be lost to the Ghaznavids within ten years or so of Maḥmud's death, but its possession now enabled Maḥmud to turn the western flank of the Ilak-khanids of Transoxania and exert pressure on the branch of the Khans established in Bukhara and Samarqand (see [CHORASMIA ii](#); Bayhaqi, pp. 910 ff.; Gardizi, ed. Ḥabibi, p. 182; Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 264-65; Sachau, 1873, Part II, pp. 297-300; Barthold, pp. 275-79; Nāẓim, pp. 56-62; Bosworth, in *EI*² IV, 1978, pp. 1065-68).

Maḥmud had made himself the heir of the Samanids in Khorasan, and he inherited from them the policy of attempting to expand westwards across northern Persia to the rich lands of Ray and Jebāl, although Samanid ambitions there had never achieved lasting success once the Buyids had secured control of both regions, thereby forming a barrier against Samanid expansion. Maḥmud was in fact able to intervene in the affairs of the Daylami Ziyarids in Ṭabarestān and Gorgān, again on the convenient pretext of supporting one claimant in a succession crisis, and, soon after the new Ziyarid amir Manučeḥr b. Qābus b. Vošmgir's succession in 403/1012-13, made Manučeḥr his vassal (Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 403-5; Nāẓim, pp. 77-79).

Nevertheless, the unrelenting series of campaigns in both the eastern Islamic lands and in India for long distracted Maḥmud from any serious confrontation with the Buyids. An expedition of 407/1016-17 into the Buyid province of Kerman, a dependency of the amirate of Fars, with the intention of supporting one of the rival claimants there, had achieved no lasting effect, and Maḥmud made no further moves against the still powerful Buyids until the very end of his reign. But the death of the regent Sayyeda in 419/1028 plunged Ray into a disorder that Majd-al-Dawla, the new amir, was unable to control. He made what proved to be a disastrous decision by inviting Maḥmud to give help against the rebellious Daylami soldiery in Ray. Maḥmud came with an army from Khorasan in 420/1029, whose vanguard commander put Majd-al-Dawla, who had come to greet him, in custody and sent him to Maḥmud. Maḥmud came to Ray, overran the city without any difficulty, had a large part of the library there burned, and unleashed a reign of terror against alleged heretics and infidels (*bāṭeni*, *qarmaṭi*), who were stoned by his order. Majd-al-Dawla was deposed and sent to Ghazna, where he spent the rest of his life. Maḥmud



entrusted the government of Ray and Isfahan to his own son Mas'ud and returned to Ghazna (Gardizi, ed. Ḥabibi, p. 193; Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 371-72; 'Otbi, tr., pp. 357-60), thereby ending Buyid rule in northern Persia. Ray now, under a Ghaznavid governor, became the forward base for probes led by Maḥmud's son Mas'ud, into northwestern Persia and against local Daylami and Kurdish powers there such as the [Kakuyids](#) of Isfahan and Hamadan and the [Mosaferids](#) of Daylam. Mas'ud's activities in the western stretch of the Ghaznavid domain were cut short, however, by Maḥmud's death and Mas'ud's need to hurry back eastwards and establish his succession to the throne in Ghazna. The whole operation had nevertheless been a great propaganda success for Maḥmud in the eyes of the wider Sunni orthodox world. He boasted in the announcement of his victory (*fath-nāma*) to the caliph in Baghdad that he had cleansed Ray and northern Persia from Isma'ilis, Mo'tazelites, and other sectaries and heretics which the weakness of Majd-al-Dawla had allowed to flourish there, and that his humbling of the Buyids would free the 'Abbasids from their tutelage in Baghdad at the hands of the Shi'ites. He even announced grandiose plans of marching westwards through Iraq to Egypt and overthrowing the Isma'ili Fatimids there (see, Ebn al-Jawzi, VIII, pp. 38-40; Nāẓim, pp. 80-85; Bosworth, 1962b, pp. 67-72; idem, 1963b, pp. 53-54). Such pipe dreams were ended by Maḥmud's death in Ghazna at that point (on 23 Rabi' II 421/30 April 1030) at the age of 59. After this, Ghaznavid dominion in western Persia only lasted some six years or so, ended by the resurgence of local powers like the Kakuyids and, above all, by the appearance there of the Saljuqs; against the better judgement of his advisers, Maḥmud had in 416/1025 allowed the Saljuq family chiefs, and their Turkmen followers and their herds, to settle on the northern rim of Khorasan, where they speedily proved to be a disruptive element, necessitating punitive expeditions against them by the commanders in 418/1027 and 419/1028 (Nāẓim, pp. 64-66).

Hence Maḥmud's achievements here proved ephemeral, but they contributed to the contemporary image of him as a rigidly orthodox Sunni hero, as a defender of the caliphs and their moral authority, and as the scourge of infidels and deviants of all kinds. This image had in any case been building up as a result of Maḥmud's campaigns down to the plains of India, mainly against pagan Hindu princes but also against Muslim sectarians in such places as Multan and Sind. The Indian campaigns are usually enumerated at some seventeen (see Nāẓim, pp. 86-122). He first of all continued his father Sebüktegin's raids down the Kabul River valley through Peshawar to the Indus. He thus challenged the Henduśāh Rājās, whose kingdom, based on



Wayhind on the middle Indus, in what is now the northern Punjab, blocked further Muslim expansion eastwards. The Rājā Jaypāl and Wayhind were attacked in 391/1001, with further campaigns subsequently against Jaypāl's successors Anandpāl, Triločanpāl, and Bhimpāl, but it was not until after several further campaigns that the Henduśāh line was finally ended in 417/1026. These attacks brought Maḥmud into contact with other Hindu potentates of the upper part of the Gangetic plain, with whom the Henduśāhis had allied in order to block the Ghaznavid raids, and on various occasions Ghaznavid troops swept eastwards as far as Bhatinda, Thanesar, Delhi, Muttra, Qanawj, Kalanjar, and Gwalior. Maḥmud failed, however, in attempts to penetrate the mountain region of Kashmir. Pockets of Muslim heretics were not allowed to continue unmolested. Raids of 396/1006 and 401/1010 against Multan put an end to the rule of the Isma'ili chief there, Abu'l-Faṭḥ Dāwud b. Naṣr, who had until then acknowledged as his suzerain the distant Fatimid caliph in Egypt. This campaign was accompanied by slaughter of the local population, anachronistically described as Qarāmeṭa in contemporary sources like Gardizi (ed. Ḥabibi, pp. 178, 180; see also Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 186, 221-22). Maḥmud gained special kudos in orthodox Sunni circles by his spectacular march of 416/1025-26 across the Thar desert of Sind and western Rajasthan into the Kathiawar peninsular, where the great idol-temple and shrine of Somnath, which contained a *linga* of the Moon-God Mahādeva, was besieged and then plundered, with fabulous quantities of booty, said to amount to 20 million dinars, being brought back to Ghazna. The news of this victory spread rapidly through the eastern Islamic world, and the caliph al-Qāder awarded Maḥmud the new title of *Kahf-al-Dawla wa'l-Eslām*, with similar honorifics for his sons Mas'ud and Moḥammad and for his brother Yusof (Gardizi, ed. Ḥabibi, pp. 190-91; Ebn al-Aṭir, IX, pp. 342-46; Bosworth, 1962a, p. 219).

Despite this contemporary role which Maḥmud cultivated as the great Ġāzi Sultan, one which was subsequently built up over the ages with him as the planter of Islam in South Asia, the primary motive behind these raids into India was clearly financial rather than religious. The centralized Ghaznavid state, with its large standing professional army of both Turkish and of Indian slave troops (many of these last remaining infidels, conversion to Islam being no requirement for employment) and of free contingents from groups like the Kurds, Deylamis, and Arabs (see Bosworth, 1963b, pp. 98-128) was extremely expensive to administer and run. The state bore down hard on its civilian population, and Maḥmud was an unyielding despot unconcerned about his subjects except as sources of revenue. His state required a continued inflow of



wealth from taxation, now supplemented by the Hindu temple treasures and other spoils, including large numbers of Indian captives (Barthold, pp. 287-89). As a result, a high standard of gold and silver coinage could be maintained. Surplus wealth could be used on such projects as beautifying the capital Ghazna with fine mosques like the 'Arus al-Falak (lit. Bride of Heaven) and other public buildings; a tower erected by Maḥmud is still extant, as is Maḥmud's own tomb, though this last seems to have later additions (Flury, 1925, pp. 65-68, 87-89). Within India itself, no long-term, mass conversion of the Hindus to Islam can have been envisaged. Any temporary, forcible conversions by the Ghaznavid armies were immediately renounced once those armies left; the Hindu princes were powerful and resilient foes, and any attempt at a permanent annexation of territory would have required an enormous army of occupation. By the end of Maḥmud's reign (r. 998-1030) the Muslims had, it was true, secured a permanent foothold in the middle Indus valley, that is, the western Punjab, with Lahore as its capital, but it was to be the Ghurids and their epigone, the Slave Kings of Delhi, who really began the process of definitively implanting Islam across northern India as far east as Bengal.

Maḥmud's military machine was thus undoubtedly a formidable one, but the empire which he built up could not have functioned without an infrastructure of highly capable Persian secretaries and officials recruited from such provinces of long-established Muslim scholarship and culture as Khorasan and attracted from even outside the Ghaznavid lands—for instance, from the Buyid amirates of western Persia. He was served by viziers of high caliber, such as Aḥmad b. Ḥasan Maymandi and Ḥasan b. Moḥammad known as Ḥasanak, and by a body of officials running an efficient administration, whose workings can be projected back from the detailed descriptions that we have for the following reign of his son Mas'ud from the pen of the secretary Abu'l-Faḥl Bayhaqi. The possibilities of patronage offered at Maḥmud's court attracted thither a group of highly capable poets in New Persian (e.g., [Farroki](#); ['Onşori](#)), who eulogized their master, and, for a short time, [Ferdowsi](#), whilst after the conquest of K̲v̲ārazm, the polymath [Abu Rayḥān Biruni](#) was brought back to Ghazna and spent the remainder of his career, some thirty years, in the service of Maḥmud (Rypka, 1968, pp. 174-77; Browne, II, pp. 117-19; Şafā, I, pp. 337-42, 421-58, 531-46, 559-67).

Maḥmud is mentioned in later Persian literature, where his passion for his favorite Turkish slave, [Ayāz](#), is a recurrent theme of love in poetry, like those



of Yusof and Zolaykā, *Layli and Majnun*, and *Kosrow and Širin*. It has also been the subject of a few romantic *maṭnawis* composed by later poets (Spiess, 1959, pp. 46-95; Kālili, 1984; Şafā, 1959, V/2, pp. 970-71). As noted above, in both official and popular history the image of Maḥmud as a Sunni hero, the hammer of heretics and implanter of Islam in the Indian subcontinent, was to resonate through the Islamic world for centuries to come. It seems to have become fixed in later Persian literature by the 7th/13th century, for instance in the poetry of Farid-al-Din ‘Aṭṭār, in which Maḥmud’s despotism and fanaticism is admittedly acknowledged, but these are outweighed by his justice and, above all, his role as leader of *jihād* and destroyer of idolatry in India (Bosworth, 1966, pp. 85-92). This image has been an enduring one. In Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Muslim India today, Maḥmud retains his role as founding father of the faith in the subcontinent, and few have dared to challenge this; when Mohammad Habib, a Marxist professor at Aligarh Muslim University, in 1926 published his book *Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin* stressing materialist desires for plunder rather than religious zeal as the motive behind the raids into India, he brought down on himself a torrent of obloquy (see Habib, cited in Hardy, pp. 21-22).

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