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THE USE OF ELEPHANTS IN THE GHAZNAVID ARMY

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The Ghaznavid dynasty, which left a significant mark on the history of Uzbek statehood, occupied a prominent place in military history due to its powerful, well-disciplined, and systematically organised army. The rulers and skilled military commanders of the Ghaznavids not only continued the military traditions that had developed and evolved over many centuries in Turan but also made a significant contribution to the further advancement of Uzbek military art by introducing new methods and techniques.

In particular, the Ghaznavid army was distinguished by its extensive use of elephants in military operations. In fact, the use of elephants for military and other purposes was not new to the people of Turan. The inhabitants of Turan had been familiar with the use of elephants since earlier times. This is clearly demonstrated by the wall paintings discovered at the archaeological sites of Afrasiab, Panjikent, and Varakhsha. These depictions portray elephants in battle scenes alongside armed warriors. This indicates that elephants in Turan were used not only in official ceremonies but also during military campaigns. In the Early Middle Ages, the army of the Abdals reportedly included approximately 700 war elephants, with nearly ten warriors armed with swords and spears positioned on the back of each elephant[1]. These accounts demonstrate that the use of elephants in the territory of Turan was not an isolated phenomenon but rather a practice based on a certain degree of established military experience. Among the Uzbek dynasties, the Ghaznavids were particularly distinguished by their extensive and systematic use of elephants in military campaigns.

The Maintenance of Elephants and Their Preparation for Military Campaigns. In order to make effective use of war elephants, the Ghaznavids introduced specialised positions responsible for their management and handling. Alongside retaining Indian mahouts (elephant keepers) in their service, they also recruited Muslim mahouts from Sistan. Furthermore, some Turkish soldiers received specialised training in handling elephants and preparing them for combat duties. When the Sultan travelled on an elephant, he usually used an enclosed palanquin mounted on its back, known as a mahd. On such occasions, the Sultan was accompanied by a specially appointed mahout (pilbān-i khāṣṣ), his apprentice, as well as the Sultan's personal ghulams (military slaves). This arrangement indicates that both the elephant's movement and the ruler's personal security were kept under strict supervision[2].

The number of elephants captured by Ghaznavid rulers is described in considerable detail in historical sources. While Sebuktigin captured 200 elephants during his reign, Sultan Mahmud captured a very large number of elephants during his various military campaigns. For instance, 120 elephants

[1] Chavannes E. Voyage de Song Yun dans l'Udyāna et le Gandhāra // Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient. – 1903. – №3. – P. 379-341.; Sen S. India through Chinese Eyes. Sir William Meyer Endowment Lectures. – Calcutta: University of Madras, 1979. – P.164.
[2] Abu'l-Fazl Beyhaqi. Translated by Bosworth. The History of Beyhaqi.Volume II. Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. 2011. P-320.

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were captured at Bhatia[3]. 185 elephants were captured at Mahaban[4], A total of 170 elephants were captured at Kannauj, 300 at Gwalior, 50 at Narain, and 350 from Raja Ganda. In addition, Ghaznavid commanders stationed in the Punjab region regularly collected elephants as tribute from Indian rajas and local chiefs.

The Ghaznavids possessed an exceptionally large number of elephants. A portion of them was allocated as the Sultan's one-fifth share of the war booty. These elephants were subsequently trained for combat and kept in specialised elephant stables.

Sultan Mahmud personally inspected the elephants on a regular annual basis. He ordered those that were underweight or weak to be sent back to India to regain weight and strength, as the climate there was considered favourable for elephants.

In 1023–1024, Sultan Mahmud inspected 1,300 elephants on the plains of Shabahar, all of which were equipped with military equipment and armour[5]. Al-Utbi, however, records the number of selected war elephants displayed during the inspection as 1,700. He estimated the total number of elephants at Mahmud's disposal to have been approximately 2,500. Sultan Mas'ud also inspected 1,670 war elephants in Kabul on 5 October 1031, figures that are consistent with the information provided by al-Utbi. During this inspection, Abu Nasr, who held the position of muqaddam-i pilbānān (chief of the mahouts), received particular recognition. He was a person of considerable authority, and all the mahouts were subordinate to his command[6].

According to Bayhaqi, an exceptionally rare war elephant was valued at 100,000 dirhams. However, maintaining, feeding, and preparing such animals for military purposes also required substantial expenditure. The presence of a large number of elephants in the Ghaznavid army demonstrates, firstly, the dynasty's military strength and, secondly, its considerable economic capacity to sustain their maintenance and supply.

Methods of using war elephants: Since the rear part of an elephant's body was relatively flat, it was convenient to mount a specially designed structure on its back, known as an 'amārī (also referred to in historical sources as maḥmal, kajawa, or hawdaj). This structure served various military and logistical purposes, particularly the transportation of soldiers and the storage of weapons and military equipment[7]. The Ghaznavids made effective use of elephants both as a combat force and as a means of transportation. They proved particularly useful during battles when military units needed to change their positions on the battlefield, a manoeuvre that experienced military commanders were able to organise skilfully. This expanded the range of tasks performed by military units equipped with war elephants and significantly enhanced commanders' ability to direct and control military operations.

Several archers, and occasionally soldiers equipped with incendiary weapons, were positioned on the backs of war elephants. The height of the elephants provided archers with a better vantage point

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[3] Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Abdujabbor al-Utbit. Tarixi Yaminiy. Toshkent. 2023.416-bet.
[4] Abu Sa’id Abdulhay Gardiziy. The ornament of histories a history of the eastern islamic lands. London. 2018. P.–91.
[5] Abu Sa’id Abdulhay Gardiziy. The ornament of histories a history of the eastern islamic lands. London. 2018. P.–93.
[6] Abu’l-Fazl Beyhaqi. Translated by Bosworth. The History of Beyhaqi.Volume II. Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. 2011. P-397.
[7] بیهقی محمد بن حسین.تاریخ بیهقی.مشهد.۱۳۸۳.ص-۶۱۵.

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from which to observe and monitor the battlefield, as well as greater opportunities to shoot and aim accurately. This gave them a tactical advantage over enemy infantry[8].

To protect war elephants from enemy attacks, particularly arrows and spears, they were equipped with specially designed armour. Such protective equipment was widely used in the Ghaznavid army and significantly increased the elephants' resilience and survivability on the battlefield[9]. Armourers paid particular attention to ensuring that elephants could move freely and maintain their balance. Accordingly, the armour was designed with specially made openings around the joints to allow unrestricted movement. Furthermore, to reduce its weight and avoid restricting the elephants' breathing, the armour did not completely cover the abdominal area. The fact that not only soldiers but also animals within the army were protected with armour demonstrates the advanced state of the Ghaznavids' military craftsmanship and armour production.

The art of using war elephants in battles (military tactics): One of the main reasons for deploying elephants in warfare was that horses were frightened by elephants and often became startled in their presence. Taking this factor into account, the Ghaznavids organised their military formations accordingly. On the battlefield, the army was generally divided into three lines:

- First line: War elephants were positioned at the front. Their task was to block the advance of enemy cavalry and disrupt its formations.
- Second line: This consisted of infantry soldiers.
- Third line: Cavalry units, consisting primarily of Turkish ghulams, were positioned at the rear. This formation constituted the principal striking force of the Ghaznavid army[10].

The historian al-Bundari describes this battle tactic as follows:

“The ruler of Ghazna (Mas'ud) arranged 50 elephants in a line at the front of his army and positioned them ahead of thousands of soldiers, for he was well aware that horses were frightened by elephants.”[11] These military practices demonstrate that elephants in the Ghaznavid military strategy served not only as a powerful striking force but also as a means of exerting considerable psychological pressure on the enemy. However, the aforementioned method of arranging troops for battle should not be interpreted as evidence that the Ghaznavid army always maintained the same formation. Depending on the circumstances and the capabilities of the opposing forces, Ghaznavid commanders employed flexible and adaptable military tactics, taking into account the battlefield, geographical conditions, climate, and other relevant factors.

For instance, in 1001, Sultan Mahmud launched a military campaign against Jayapala, the ruler of the Hindu Shahi dynasty. Jayapala organised his defensive forces in the Peshawar Valley, relying on 12,000 cavalrymen, 30,000 infantrymen, and 300 war elephants positioned in the front line and armed with swords, bows and arrows, and spears. This confrontation was one of Sultan Mahmud's first battles in which he, commanding an army without elephants, faced a powerful opponent whose forces included a substantial contingent of war elephants[12].

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[8] شاهبختی، محسن؛ ناصریدار، مصطفی؛ دلیرشی، بشار؛ اخس، جواد. جایگاه فیل هندی در سپاهگری عصر غزنوی.فصلنامه علمیپژوهشی تاریخ، شماره ۵۶، زمستان ۱۳۹۰، ص-۱۷۶

[9] Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Abdujabbor al-Utbit. Tarixi Yaminiy. Toshkent. 2023. 506-bet.

[10] شاهبختی، محسن؛ ناصریدار، مصطفی؛ دلیرشی، بشار؛ اخس، جواد. جایگاه فیل هندی در سپاهگری عصر غزنوی.فصلنامه علمیپژوهشی تاریخ، شماره ۵۶، زمستان ۱۳۹۰، ص-۱۷۳

[11] فتح بن علی بنداری.تاریخ سلسلهٔ سلجوقی. تهران: بنیاد فرهنگ ایران. ۱۳۶۵.ص-۳۰۵

[12] Muhammad Nazim. The life and times of Mahmud of Ghazna.Cambridge university press. 1921.P.145.

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Sultan Mahmud rendered the enemy's advantages ineffective through careful advance planning and precise command of his troops' movements. The Ghaznavid horse archers targeted the elephants' legs, disabling them and preventing them from moving. The infantry then engaged the elephants at close range, striking their trunks. As a result, fifteen elephants were killed, while many others were captured alive.

This victory clearly demonstrated Sultan Mahmud's exceptional military command skills, particularly his ability to plan battles, coordinate different branches of the army, and exercise effective command and control. The encounter also illustrates that war elephants did not constitute an invincible force in the Ghaznavid military context; rather, flexible and carefully devised tactical solutions were developed to counter them. It clearly demonstrates that the outcome of a battle was determined not merely by numerical strength or military power, but by the commander's strategic thinking and ability to direct military operations.

Sultan Mahmud also made active use of elephants during military operations against Khalaf ibn Ahmad in Sistan in 1002. Elephants were particularly effective in siege warfare, where they played an important role in breaching fortifications. The destruction of enemy defensive walls and gates was carried out primarily with the assistance of elephants. Similar tactics were employed during the campaign against Khalaf ibn Ahmad.

The Ghaznavid elephants also played an active role on the battlefield. Using their trunks, they seized soldiers from their horses and struck them, while enemy infantry suffered heavy casualties from being trampled under the elephants' feet. As a result, Khalaf ibn Ahmad was forced to surrender and hand over the fortress[13].

Weaknesses and challenges of war elephants in battle: Like any other military asset, war elephants had their own specific weaknesses. The elephant's trunk was one of its most important yet vulnerable anatomical features. It contains approximately 40,000 nerve and muscle fibres, and any injury to it can cause the animal excruciating pain[14]. Furthermore, since elephants carry out approximately 70 per cent of their breathing through their trunks, any injury to this organ poses a serious threat to their survival[15].

Another significant problem was the phenomenon of elephants becoming musth or uncontrollably agitated. This could occur when elephants were wounded or frightened. Under such circumstances, they became extremely difficult to control. In this state, elephants attacked soldiers regardless of which side they belonged to, trampling them underfoot.

Bayhaqi describes an incident during the Battle of Kirman through the words of Sultan Mas'ud: “Our male elephants were so severely wounded by arrows and spears that, overcome by pain, they turned back and began trampling our own soldiers... A wounded elephant shows no mercy to anyone on the battlefield.”[16]

In such situations, the mahouts were responsible for preventing a rampaging elephant from destroying their own army. To achieve this, they were expected to strike the animal on the back of its neck with a special dagger, killing it if necessary.

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[13] Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Abdujabbor al-Utbit. Tarixi Yaminiy. Toshkent. 2023. 306-bet.
[14] Sukumar R.The Living Elephants. Oxford University Press. 2003.P.-312.
[15] Fowler, Murray. Biology Medicine and Surgery of Elephant. Blackwell.2006. P.-112.
[16] بیهقی محمد بن حسین.تاریخ بیهقی.مشهد.۱۳۸۳.ص. ۶۲۶

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The issue of elephant provisioning was also of considerable importance. Feeding and maintaining elephants required substantial financial resources and labour. A fully grown elephant consumed an average of 130–150 kg of food per day[17]. Depending on climatic conditions, an elephant also consumed between 100 and 200 litres of water per day. Bayhaqi provides the following account concerning the army's supply difficulties: “Fighting was extremely intense every day... It had become very difficult to find fodder for the camels and food for the elephants”[18]. Even in times of peace, maintaining elephants imposed a considerable financial burden on the state treasury. However, the Ghaznavids appear to have faced no significant difficulties in providing for their elephants, which demonstrates their considerable economic strength as well. By contrast, Genghis Khan reportedly ordered the release or destruction of elephants because of the enormous quantities of food they consumed[19].

In conclusion, elephants were effectively employed in military operations throughout the history of Uzbek statehood. Their use was particularly widespread during the Ghaznavid dynasty. War elephants served as a powerful striking force in military campaigns. In particular, they played a significant role in disrupting enemy formations, restricting the movement of cavalry units, capturing fortresses, and breaching defensive walls and city gates.

[17] Hickman, C.Zoology. Washington: Janice Roerig-Blon.2008. P-623.
[18] بیهقی محمد بن حسین.تاریخ بیهقی.مشهد.۱۳۸۳.ص. ۱۶۲.
[19] جوینی، عطاملک (۱۳۸۵)، تاریخ جهانگشای، مصحح محمد قزوینی، تهران: دنیای کتاب.ص-۹۴.