



## **THE SCIENTIFIC AND INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT AT THE GHAZNAVID COURT AND THE SCHOLARLY ROOTS OF COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

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<b>Article history:</b>	<b>Abstract:</b>
<b>Received:</b> 8 <sup>th</sup> March 2026 <b>Accepted:</b> 7 <sup>th</sup> April 2026	<p>This study examines the scientific and intellectual environment of the Ghaznavid court and its role in the formation of early comparative religious studies within the medieval Islamic world. The Ghaznavid dynasty (977–1186), while widely recognized for its military and political achievements, also functioned as a significant center of cultural and scholarly production. Cities such as Ghazna, Balkh, and Nishapur emerged as major intellectual hubs, attracting scholars, theologians, historians, and scientists. The institutional structures of the court, particularly the tradition of <i>nadim</i> assemblies, fostered a dynamic environment for scholarly discourse and interdisciplinary exchange.</p> <p>The study further explores how the Ghaznavids' political and military engagements, especially with the Indian subcontinent, contributed to expanding Muslim scholars' knowledge of diverse religious traditions. This interaction facilitated the development of comparative methodologies in the study of religions and sects (<i>milal wa-nihal</i>). The works of prominent scholars such as Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Gardizi, Bayhaqi, and Abu al-Ma'ali Ubaydullah illustrate a transition from polemical and doctrinal approaches toward more descriptive and analytical frameworks.</p>

**Keywords:** Ghaznavid dynasty; comparative religion; *milal wa-nihal*; Islamic intellectual history; Ghazna; al-Biruni; Gardizi; Bayhaqi; *nadim* institution; medieval Islam; religious classification; interreligious encounter; South Asia; Islamic theology; Khurasan

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Ghaznavid dynasty, as one of the most significant political structures in medieval Islamic history, was distinguished not only by its military and political power, but also by its considerable contributions to the development of cultural and intellectual life. The historical significance of this dynasty was by no means limited to military campaigns or political expansion. Rather, during this period, cities such as Ghazni, Balkh, and Nishapur emerged as major centers of scholarly and cultural activity, while historians, poets, theologians, astronomers, and encyclopedic scholars gathered at the royal court. As a result, scholarly works were produced in the fields of jurisprudence, Islamic doctrine, and the comparative study of religions. The Ghaznavids' sustained military and political engagement with the Indian subcontinent considerably broadened the perspectives of Muslim authors regarding South Asia.

The Ghaznavids (977–1186) were a political structure established by slave (*ghulam*) soldiers of Turkic origin, governed on the basis of monarchical authority and Islamic law (*sharia*), and functioning

initially as an emirate and subsequently as a sultanate. The name of the dynasty derives from its principal political center, the city of Ghazni (historically known as Ghazna), located in the present-day southeastern region of Afghanistan. The dynasty reached the apex of its power during the first half of the eleventh century, exercising dominion over vast territories extending from the western regions of Iran to the northwestern parts of the Indian subcontinent (*M. O'Neal, 2018, pp.253-257*). This empire is regarded as one of the most powerful political structures to emerge in the Islamic world following the weakening and fragmentation of the central authority of the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth century. The Ghaznavids are particularly recognized in the history of India as a political force that made a significant and lasting contribution to the firm establishment of Islam in the Punjab region.

### **METHODS**

This study employs a multi-layered methodological framework combining the historical-comparative method, the historical-genetic method, source criticism, and discourse analysis to examine the intellectual and institutional dimensions of comparative



religious thought within the Ghaznavid court milieu. The historical-comparative method is applied systematically to position the Bayan al-adyan of Abu l-Ma'ali within the broader heresiographical tradition of medieval Islamic scholarship, enabling a structured evaluation of its doctrinal taxonomy against the classificatory frameworks advanced by al-Baghdadi in *al-Farq bayn al-firaq*, al-Shahrastani in *al-Milal wa-l-nihal*, and Ibn Ḥazm in *al-Fiṣal fi l-milal*. Through the historical-genetic method, the study traces the developmental trajectory of heresiographical genre conventions, identifying how earlier classificatory schemas were inherited, modified, or contested across successive authors and institutional contexts. Source criticism is applied at both the external and internal levels: external analysis addresses questions of provenance, authorial identity, transmission history, and manuscript tradition, while internal analysis interrogates the internal consistency of doctrinal arguments, the reliability of reported positions, and the degree to which confessional boundaries are rhetorically constructed rather than descriptively neutral. Discourse analysis foregrounds the terminological choices, polemical register, and ideological framing embedded within the text, illuminating how the delineation of sectarian categories served not merely taxonomic purposes but functioned as a mechanism for legitimizing orthodoxy and delegitimizing rival confessional communities. Taken together, these methods allow the study to demonstrate how the production of religious knowledge at the Ghaznavid court reflected the intersection of doctrinal imperatives, patronage structures, and the expanding cross-cultural encounters that characterized the eleventh-century Islamic East.

## **RESULTS**

The founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty was Sebüktegin ibn Juq (also known as Qara Bechkem), who was born into a pagan family in the city of Barskhan (Bars-khan), situated on the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul in present day Kyrgyzstan. Drawing upon this biographical detail, scholars have argued that his ethnic origins are to be attributed to the Karluk Turks. He was subsequently taken captive and incorporated into the Turkic guard of the Samanid state (819–1005), whose political and cultural center was the city of Bukhara. Sebüktegin initially entered the service of Alp-Tegin (d. 963), a slave commander (ghulam) who served as the chief military commander of Khurasan under Samanid rule. Following the death of Amir Abd al-Malik ibn Nuh in 961, Alp-Tegin attempted to install his own candidate on the Samanid throne; however, this political initiative ended in failure. As a consequence, he withdrew to the

city of Ghazni in the province of Zabulistan, located on the southeastern frontier of the empire, where he proceeded to displace the existing local ruling dynasty from power. Following Alp-Tegin's death, authority over Ghazni passed through the hands of several slave commanders. Finally, in 977, Sebüktegin was elected commander of Ghazni.

Over the course of his nearly two-decade reign, his political authority expanded to encompass the territories surrounding Zabulistan (*Bosworth C. E., 1998, pp.95-117*), including Kabul, Punjab, Bust (in present-day southern Afghanistan), Qusdar (Baluchistan), as well as Khurasan and Tokharistan, situated to the south of the Amu Darya (*Bosworth C. E., 1965*). Although Sebüktegin formally maintained his allegiance to the Samanid state — as attested by his title al-Ḥājib al-ajall ("the most exalted commander") — he pursued, in practice, an effectively independent political course (*Giunta R., Bresc C., 2004, pp.165-241*). It is for this reason that, from a historical perspective, Sebüktegin is regarded as the founder of the state. Following Sebüktegin's death, his son Mahmud Ghaznavi secured political supremacy in his capacity as military commander of Khurasan. He proceeded to remove his brother Isma'il, who had been ruling over Ghazni and Balkh, from power, thereby becoming the sole heir to the state patrimony and political legacy left by his father. By 999, Mahmud Ghaznavi had abolished all remaining administrative vestiges of Samanid authority and had, in effect, begun to operate as an independent sovereign.

In the course of distancing himself from Samanid sovereign, Mahmud initially recognized the deposed Abbasid caliph Abd al-Karim (974–991), and subsequently emerged as a supporting ruler under Ahmad (991–1031). The caliphate conferred upon him the honorific titles of Yamīn al-Dawla ("Right Hand of the State") and Amin al-Milla ("Trustee of the Community"), titles which served to consolidate the religious and political legitimacy of Mahmud's authority. The title Yamīn al-Dawla in particular enhanced the political prestige of the dynasty, to the extent that in certain sources the Ghaznavid dynasty is also referred to as the Yaminids. The political standing conferred by the caliphate enabled the ruler to conduct his affairs as a defender of Sunni Islam, on the basis of which he organized military campaigns against both Muslim and non-Muslim adversaries. As a result, the Saffarids of Sistan, the ruler of Georgia, the Farughids of Guzgan, and the Ma'munids of Khwarazm were each removed from power. With the Qarakhanid Turks, who held dominion over Transoxiana, however, Mahmud



generally sought to maintain a policy of equilibrium, with the Amu Darya serving as the boundary demarcating the territories of the two states. Nevertheless, in 1008, the incursion of Qarakhanid forces under the command of Ilek Khan Nasr ibn Ali and Yusuf Qadir Khan into Tokharistan compelled Mahmud to mount armed resistance.

He subsequently established military strongholds in Termez and Khwarazm, on the far side of the Amu Darya, a policy directed primarily at exerting pressure upon Alp-Tegin, the ruler of Bukhara and Samarkand. During Mahmud's reign, his son Mas'ud conducted campaigns into the territory of Ghur, thereby contributing to the spread of Islam in those regions. Subsequently, the Ghaznavids launched campaigns westward into Iran, directing their forces against the territories under Buyid suzerainty. The Buyids had exercised control over Baghdad since 945, substantially curtailing the political authority of the Abbasid caliphs. In 1029, Mahmud's forces seized Ray and Jibal. At the time of Mahmud's death, Mas'ud was engaged in a military expedition at Isfahan. Upon receiving news of his father's passing, he returned eastward and deposed his brother Muhammad, who had been designated heir to the throne at Ghazni. Historical sources, however, frequently characterize Mas'ud as a less politically successful ruler than his father. He proved unable to halt the westward advance of the Oghuz Turkmens under the leadership of the Seljuq dynasty from Central Asia. Consequently, in 1040, Seljuq forces defeated Mas'ud and brought Ghaznavid control over Khurasan to an end (*Halm..H, 2009, pp.209-221*).

Following Mas'ud's unsuccessful reign, the territorial extent of the Ghaznavid state was reduced to eastern Afghanistan and the northwestern regions of India, though Baluchistan and the coastal territories of Makran also maintained a degree of connection with Ghazni. This relative contraction of territory enabled subsequent Ghaznavid sultans to retain power for nearly a century and a half beyond Mas'ud's death in 1041, during which period the state's political orientation shifted increasingly toward India. In the late 1040s and early 1050s, the Ghaznavid state was beset by dynastic instability and a general political crisis. Around 1051–1052, the slave Tugrul seized power through the assassination of Abd al-Rashid and a number of Ghaznavid princes. However, Tugrul's usurpation proved short-lived. Following his death, the state preserved its stability under the reign of Farrukh-zād and, in particular, Ibrahim, whose nearly forty-year reign was marked by relative calm and the normalization of relations with the Seljuqs. According to

the sources, Farrukhzad was the first Ghaznavid ruler to employ the title al-sultan al-mu'azzam ("the great sultan") on his coinage, whereas earlier rulers had generally adhered to the Samanid practice of using the formal title of "amir". Nevertheless, the title "sultan" (denoting "authority" or "power") had already been applied to Mahmud in panegyric verse and other contexts.

Following the death of Ibrahim's son Mas'ud III in 1115, renewed succession struggles erupted within the Ghaznavid dynasty. Power ultimately passed to Mas'ud's son Bahramshah, who consolidated his authority with the patronage of the Great Seljuq sultan Sanjar ibn Malikshah (1118–1157). In this manner, the Ghaznavid state became formally subordinated to Seljuq suzerainty. By the mid-twelfth century, the Ghaznavids found themselves under increasing pressure from the rising power of the Ghurid state. The destruction of Ghazni by Ala ad-din Husayn around 1150 proved a severe blow to the dynasty. The subsequent capture of Ghazni by Oghuz adventurers around 1162 compelled the Ghaznavids to retreat definitively to the Punjab. The final end of the Ghaznavid dynasty came in 1186, when Muhammad Ghuri seized Lahore and deposed the last Ghaznavid ruler, Khusraw Malik.

The initial Muslim penetration of India had begun in the seventh century, with Arab dominion firmly established in Sind during the reign of Muhammad ibn Qasim (d. 715). It was, however, the Ghaznavid sultans who extended the reach of Islam to the Punjab and integrated this region politically into the Iranian plateau, thereby forging an important migratory corridor linking the Near East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. During Mahmud Ghaznavi reign, military campaigns into India through the mountain passes of Afghanistan became an almost annual occurrence (*M.Inaba., 2013, pp.75-89*). Continuing the policy initiated by his father Sebuktegin, Mahmud defeated the Hindushahi dynasty, which had ruled at Wayhind (near Hind, northeast of the fortress of Attock), through a series of military campaigns. Thereafter, numerous fortresses and major cities of northwestern India became targets of Ghaznavid plunder. Among these were Bhaiya (Bhatinda) in 1004–1005; Bhimnagar (Nagarkot, present-day Kangra) and Narayan (Narayanpur) in 1009; Nandana in 1013–1014; and Sirsawa, Baran (Bulandshahr), Mahaban, Muttra (Mathura), Kanauj, Munj, Asi (Asni), and Sharwa in 1018–1019. In 1019–1020 and again in 1022–1023, Mahmud campaigned against the Chandella ruler of Kalinjar, referred to in Muslim sources as Nanda (possibly Gaṇḍa or his successor Vidyadhara), who was



ultimately compelled to submit to Ghaznavid authority (*Ray H., 1973*). Their military campaigns were not directed solely against Hindu rulers; the Ghaznavids also conducted campaigns against the Ismaili communities of Sind and Multan, who were regarded as political and religious adversaries by virtue of their allegiance to the Fatimid Caliphate based in Cairo (*Maclean.D., 1989, pp.137*). Mas'ud I likewise continued his father's policy in India, seizing Sarsati and Hansi, and dispatching his Indian commander Ahmad ibn Inaltegin to incorporate Benares into the state's territory.

Under later Ghaznavid sultans, military campaigns into India were conducted increasingly in the form of ghaza — that is, religiously motivated warfare aimed at the propagation of Islam — and frequently did not culminate in permanent territorial annexation. During Ibrahim's reign, for instance, several such campaigns are recorded. Around 1086–1090, the city of Agra was seized by Prince Sayf al-Dawla Mahmud. Ibrahim's son and successor Mas'ud III took the raja of Kanauj captive, later releasing him in exchange for ransom. His commander Tughantegin conducted a campaign as far as the Ganges. Such ghazi activities are attested in the court poetry of Fakhr-i Mudabbir and other court poets down to the reign of the last Ghaznavid ruler, Khusraw Malik. The tax known as turuskadanda ("the Turkish penalty"), mentioned in Gahadavala inscriptions, similarly arose in connection with these events (*Minorski.V., 1948., p. 600*). Nevertheless, Ghaznavid territorial control in India remained essentially confined to the Punjab, with the city of Lahore serving as the dynasty's second and final capital. The Ghaznavid sultans regularly dispatched fathnama (victory announcements) to Baghdad and other Muslim courts reporting on their military triumphs.

The Ghaznavid dynasty is regarded as one of the most significant political dynasties in medieval Islamic history. It was under their rule that a local ruling dynasty — the Samanids — was for the first time displaced from power by their own commanders, a process that simultaneously represented the ascendancy of Turkic political power in the Near East. The Ghaznavid state constituted a highly centralized political structure under sultanate authority, in which Turkic slave soldiers formed the principal pillar of the military apparatus, serving simultaneously as senior military commanders and palace guards. The administrative apparatus of state governance was largely composed of Persian-speaking secretaries and officials. It was from within this very milieu that the celebrated historians of the Ghaznavid era emerged:

Abu Nasr Utbi, Abu al-Fadl Bayhaqi, and Abu Sa'ïd Abd al-Hayy Gardizi.

In all courts of eastern muslim rulers, sessions of intimate companionship known as nadim were held to foster intellectual and cultural environments. This tradition, originating with the Umayyads and Abbasids and continuing through the reigns of non-Arab rulers, was preserved in Turco-Islamic states as well. A ruler's nadim was by nature a person of good character and virtue — an individual capable of engaging in both light-hearted conversation and serious deliberation on matters of the gravest importance. Such companions could point out the ruler's errors without causing offense, through learned disputation or poetic praise. Court companions were divided into three categories: scholars who engaged the ruler in intellectual debate constituted the first group; representatives of the military sphere occupied the second; while poets, musicians, and other practitioners of the arts formed the third (*Zeyden.C., 2012., p.661*). During the Ghaznavid period, companions were classified into two groups — resident and non-resident. Resident companions were required to live permanently at court, whereas non-resident companions were permitted to return to their homes following scholarly sessions or court entertainments. Abul Hasan Hosiriy, Abul Hasan Karajiy, Abul Hasan Oqiliy, Muzaffar Hokim, Abdulmalik Tusiy, Tabib Abu Nasr, Abu Sahl Zuzaniy, Abu Rayhon Beruniy, Abul Maoliy Ubaydulloh, shoirlardan Unsuriy, Firdavsiy, Asadiy, Farruxiy and Minuchihriy are depicted in the Tarikh-i Bayhaqi as prominent court companions (*Dedeman S., 2023, p.45*). Beyond this, Ghaznavid court companions participated in diplomatic activities, serving as envoys, taking part in significant political negotiations, and being selected as trusted custodians of state secrets. The scholarly sessions organized by rulers served as the primary institutional mechanism for supporting intellectual activity at court, with the Lashkar-i Bazar palace serving as a gathering place for men of learning. Following each session, rulers rewarded every participant (*Sadan.J., 1993, p.850*). These analyses demonstrate that the nadim sessions at the Ghaznavid court occupied a significant position not only as a political and cultural institution, but also as a distinctive intellectual and academic center of Islamic civilization during the ninth through twelfth centuries.

Between the ninth and twelfth centuries, scholarly investigations into the comparative study of religions and the examination of Islamic sects were pursued not only in Transoxiana and Khurasan, but throughout the islamic world. Several factors contributed to this development. Between the eighth



and eleventh centuries, alongside the traditional legal schools and doctrinal orientations of muslim society, various political currents and sects had also taken shape (*Watt.W., 1973, p.289*). In response to contentious issues arising from the kharijites, mu'tazilites, and shi'ite movements, specialized literature dealing with sectarian classifications began to appear. A representative example is Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi's *al-Farq bayn al-firaq*, in which the sects of islam are systematically classified. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries, the expansion of the muslim world brought it into contact with the religious beliefs of India, Central Asia, and Iran, generating a need for the scholarly and comparative investigation of these religions (*Lawrance.B., 1976, p.5*). Simultaneously, the discipline of kalam developed as a theoretical science dedicated to the defense of Islamic doctrine. Mutakallimūn engaged in the systematic study of doctrines from other religious traditions — comparing them with Islamic theology as a means of establishing truth (*Frank.R., 1992, p.8*). This process gave rise to the milal wa-nihāl literature. By this period, the cities of Nishapur, Balkh, and Ghazni in Khurasan had developed into intellectual environments where thinkers engaged in scholarly debate and critical inquiry. The Ghaznavid sultans were recognized as significant patrons of Arab and especially Persian culture, in this respect continuing the cultural traditions of their Samanid predecessors. The most celebrated scholar to have worked under Ghaznavid patronage was the Khwarazmian polymath Abu Rayhan al-Biruni. His celebrated Indological work, *Kitab taḥqīq ma lil-Hind*, provides an extraordinarily detailed account of Indian society and culture in the early eleventh century. Gardizi's brief description of India draws partly on al-Biruni's information and ultimately traces back to an earlier work by the Samanid vizier Abu Abd Allah Jayhani, which in turn is linked to an even earlier source — a report prepared around 800 for the Abbasid vizier Bayhaki Yahya ibn Khalid. The Ghaznavid court also made substantial contributions to the development of New Persian literature, attracting numerous celebrated writers and poets to its service. Among these was Abu al-Qasim Firdavsi's celebrated epic *Shāhnāma*, composed during this period. The court was also home to such distinguished poets as Unsuri Balxiy, Farruxiy Sistoniy, Manuchehriy Domg'oniy, Asjadi Marvaziy, Jazoiriy Roziy, Hakim Sanoyi, Mas'ud Sa'd Salmon, Usmon Muxtoriy, Abul Faraj Runiy and Sayyid Hasan G'aznaviy. Some Ghaznavid rulers also distinguished themselves as patrons of major architectural undertakings. Although many of their constructions have not survived the passage of time, several

significant architectural monuments remain in present-day Afghanistan, including the ruins of the palace of Mas'ud III in Ghazni and its minaret, as well as the Minaret of Bahramshah (*Hillenbrand.R., 2000, p.145*). The remains of Ghaznavid palaces at Bust (Lashkar-i Bazar) likewise attest to the former political power and cultural sophistication of this dynasty.

Throughout the period of this dynasty's activity, Khurasan emerged not only as a military and political force in the medieval Muslim East, but also as an important center of scholarly and cultural processes. Building upon the administrative and cultural legacy inherited from the Samanid era, the Ghaznavids established a consolidated political system across the territories of Khurasan, Afghanistan, and northern India. As a result, the city of Ghazni rapidly developed into a major center of political, intellectual, and literary life. This process was intimately linked to the political ascendancy of the Turkic military elite and the growing continuity of the Persian administrative system. It was precisely these factors that transformed the Ghaznavid state from a regional into a more broadly influential polity. Moreover, the military and political relations conducted by the Ghaznavids with India produced new religious and cultural knowledge for Muslim authors. Perceptions that had initially been confined to confrontation and conflict gradually became the foundation for observation, description, and comparative analysis. As a result, a significant scholarly foundation was established for the fields of milal wa-nihāl, history, and comparative religious studies.

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**World Bulletin of Social Sciences (WBSS)**

**Available Online at:** <https://www.scholarexpress.net>

Vol. 57, April 2026

**ISSN:** 2749-361X