

# FROM THE HISTORY OF TURKIC KHAJIBS WHO SERVED THE SAMANIDS: ALPTEGIN

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## **Abstract:**

The 9th–10th centuries mark a period of significant political and military transformations in Central Asia. One notable aspect of this era was the rise of Turkic commanders who served under the Samanid dynasty and gradually emerged as powerful political actors. Among them, Alptegin stands out for having risen through the ranks as a military slave (ghulam) and later establishing an autonomous political authority in Ghazna. This article explores Alptegin's career, his relations with the Samanids, his conquest of Ghazna, and his role in laying the foundation of the Ghaznavid state. Drawing on key historical sources such as *Tarikh-i Bayhaqi*, *Zayn al-Akhbar*, *Tarikh-i Yamini*, and *Siyasatnama*, this paper highlights the transformation of military slaves into political elites in early Islamic Central Asia.

**Keywords:** Alptegin, Samanids, Ghazna, Ghaznavids, ghulam, political elite, 9th–10th century, Central Asia, Transoxiana, Khurasan, Balkh, *Siyasatnama*, *Tarikh-i Bayhaqi*, *Tarikh-i Yamini*, *Zayn al-Akhbar*, military slavery, Turkic commanders, hajib, sipahsalar, independent rule, Islamic statecraft, court officials, medieval generals.

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the Turkic khajibs who served the Samanids was Alptegin (his name is also sometimes written as Alptigin, Alp Tekin, or Alp Takin). He began his career as a slave and later remained in history as the founder of an independent new dynasty. The Samanid army was mainly composed of Turkic slave soldiers (ghulams). When needed, especially when interests intersected with nomadic groups along the northern frontiers, the Samanid amirs led expeditions into the steppes. For example, in 893, Amir Ismail ibn Ahmad led a major expedition to Talas, resulting in the plundering of the capital of the Qarluq Turks. The Samanids brought back large quantities of spoils, including slaves and livestock. Most of these slaves hoped to become members of the Samanid dynasty's elite forces or those of other Muslim powers, including the caliph in Baghdad. This is because military slavery in the Muslim world was very different from other forms of slavery, especially from that practiced in the West. Military slavery created a class of soldiers who formed the socio-military elite of their societies. These individuals were well-trained, well-paid, and owned personal property and families. They were slaves in name only. Military slaves were promoted and rewarded based on their performance, bravery, intelligence, and loyalty. Eventually, many even obtained authority over specific regions and armies. Alptegin was one such slave.

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## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY**

Historical information about him is found in several sources, including Narshakhi's History of Bukhara, Nizam al-Mulk's Siyasatnama, Gardizi's Zayn al-Akhbar, Ibn al-Athir's Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh, Abu'l-Fazl Bayhaqi's Tarikh-i Bayhaqi, and Abu Nasr al-Utbi's Tarikh-i Yamini. Among these, relatively more detailed information can be found in the works of Nizam al-Mulk and Gardizi, although these accounts require critical analysis. In the works of Ibn al-Athir and Narshakhi, only brief facts are encountered. The works of Abu Nasr al-Utbi [2] and Abu'l-Fazl Bayhaqi [4] are dedicated to the periods of Subuktigin, Sultan Mahmud, and Mas'ud of the Ghaznavid dynasty, and information about Alptegin is provided primarily in the context of Subuktigin's life and activities, without detailed information about Alptegin's personal life or political career. For example, Tarikh-i Yamini provides the following information: "Alptegin was a Turkic commander who held a high position in the Samanid state, later seized Ghazna, and established his rule there. After his death, Subuktigin was appointed in his place."

By conducting comparative and critical analysis of these sources, we can extract further details regarding Alptegin's life and activities.

Modern researchers have also published several academic studies on Alptegin's life and career. Among the most significant are C.E. Bosworth's annotated translation of Gardizi's work titled The Ornament of Histories [12], and Jürgen Paul's article Alptegin in the Siyasatnama [11]. This article analyzes how Alptegin is portrayed in historical sources, especially in Nizam al-Mulk's Siyasatnama. The author highlights the issues of the relationship between the ruler and his closest aides by presenting Alptegin as a loyal servant. The article aims more to convey moral and political lessons than to portray Alptegin's historical personality. In the article The Slave Who Founded an Empire [13], written by Adam Ali, although no specific sources are cited, it is assumed to be based on the works of Gardizi and Nizam al-Mulk. The article describes Alptegin's life journey from being a slave to becoming the founder of an empire and discusses his service under the Samanids, his capture of Ghazna, and the establishment of the Ghaznavid dynasty. In the article A Venture on the Frontier: Alptegin's Conquest of Ghazna and its Sequel [10], written by Minoru Inaba, Alptegin's conquest of Ghazna and the historical consequences of this event are also analyzed. Alptegin, a high-ranking military official in the Samanid state, heads to Ghazna due to political struggles and establishes an independent authority there. This action leads to the foundation of the Ghaznavid dynasty. This article, written based on numerous sources, also provides detailed information about Alptegin's military campaigns, political strategies, and the role of Ghazna in the Muslim world.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Nothing is known about Alptegin's origin before his service to the Samanids. He was a Turk purchased by the Samanids and served in the Samanid army as a ghulam (military slave). Alptegin was initially purchased by Amir Ahmad ibn Ismail (who reigned from 907 to 914) and also served Nasr ibn Ahmad (who reigned from 914 to 943). However, his career truly flourished during the reign of Amir Nuh I (943–954), when he rose to the position of hajib al-

hujjab (chief commander of the army). He rose even higher during the reign of Nuh I's successor, Abd al-Malik (954–961). During this amir's rule, he gained great power and influence, even becoming more powerful than the amir himself. Indeed, in 961, he forced Amir Abd al-Malik to appoint him as governor of Khurasan and commander-in-chief of the Khurasan army, and he also compelled the amir to appoint his own patron, Abu Ali Muhammad Bal'ami, as his vizier [6.61]. Mansur ibn Nuh appointed Alptegin as governor of Balkh, to which he replied, "I am not a tax collector but the chief hajib" [6.61], and he refused to return to the court. As a result, Mansur was compelled to appoint him as commander in Khurasan in place of Abu Mansur, a region considered strategically important.

In the institution of military slavery, which dominated the politics and military of the Muslim world from the 9th to the 19th century, the promotion system was gradual and based, as mentioned above, on good service, experience, and loyalty. Nizam al-Mulk, the great statesman and vizier of the Seljuks, in his book *Siyasatnama*, explains how this system operated during the Samanid period when Alptegin was in service. He writes that this system was also in effect during the Samanid era. Ghulams were promoted step-by-step based on their length of service and overall performance. Thus, once a ghulam was purchased, he would wear a short robe and boots and serve on foot for a year; during this first year, the ghulam was not allowed to ride a horse either alone or in public, and if caught riding, he would be punished. After completing one year of service in boots, he would speak with the commander of the tent guard, who would inform the king; then he would be given a Turkic horse with a simple leather bridle. After serving for another year with the horse and whip, in the third year, he would be given a sword. In the fourth year, they would provide him with a hat and bow tied while mounted. In the fifth year, he would receive a better saddle, a decorated bridle, a cloak, and a mace. In the sixth year, he would serve as a cupbearer or water-bearer, with a cup tied to his belt. In the seventh year, he would receive a robe. In the eighth year, he would be given a tent with sixteen pegs at the top and three newly purchased ghulams for his troops; from then on, he would receive the title of haylbashi (tent chief) and would wear a black felt hat embroidered with silver thread and a richly decorated robe. Every year, his clothing and accessories would be upgraded, and his rank and responsibilities would increase with the title of hajib, continuing until he became the commander of the army. Once he proved his capability, skill, and bravery, performed several admirable deeds, and demonstrated attentiveness to his comrades and loyalty to his master, only at the age of thirty-five to forty would he be appointed as an amir and assigned to a province [7.101].

During the Samanid period, ghulams had to spend years proving themselves, demonstrating loyalty, and improving their military, political, and administrative capabilities before being promoted to higher positions in the army or administration. Therefore, when one of these military slaves rose to the rank of amir or was appointed commander of a military unit or governor of a province, he would already be an experienced soldier, leader, administrator, and politician. Alptegin was exactly such a figure.

In Nizam al-Mulk's *Siyasatnama*, Alptegin is highly praised, described as a loyal Turkish ghulam who attained the position of sipahsalar in Khurasan at the age of thirty-five and was

one of the key figures of the Samanid state. His departure from the Samanids is even cited as one of the causes of the state's decline. Furthermore, he is regarded as the founder and first ruler of the Ghaznavid state [7.105]. According to Nizam al-Mulk, Alptegin was the victim of court intrigues orchestrated by jealous courtiers in the Samanid capital. He incorrectly asserts that these intrigues occurred after the death of Nuh ibn Nasr (who ruled from 943 to 954), rather than after the death of Abd al-Malik. According to Nizam al-Mulk, after the amir's death, a message came from the courtiers, including the vizier in Bukhara, Abu Ali Muhammad Bal'ami, and his supporters, to appoint a new ruler. The options were the thirty-year-old younger brother of Nuh ibn Nasr or his sixteen-year-old son. Alptegin advised that the older brother, due to his maturity and experience, was more suitable for the throne. However, the courtiers installed the amir's young son as ruler. Alptegin's letter reached the prince, and this created a sense of animosity in the latter's heart [7.105].

In our opinion, there are some inconsistencies in this information. Because after the death of Nuh ibn Nasr, it was his son Abd al-Malik who ascended the throne [5.145]. Sources state that he became ruler at the age of 10 and that his relationship with Alptegin was good, noting that during Abd al-Malik's reign, Alptegin took control of the government [3.309]. In 956, Bakr ibn Malik was summoned from his position as deputy of Khurasan and was executed in the amir's palace by Alptegin [8.46], which also demonstrates Alptegin's influence at court during this time. Later, the amir attempted to free himself from the control of military commanders [3.310], which changed the political situation.

If it was Amir Abd al-Malik who died, then Alptegin supported not his brother, but his son [3.311]. (However, even then Abd al-Malik's son would not have been 16 years old, since Abd al-Malik died at the age of 17 after falling from a horse [1.53]) and it was his brother Mansur ibn Nuh who took the throne. Alptegin and his ally Vizier Abu Ali Muhammad Bal'ami, who "did nothing without his advice" [6.62], planned to place Abd al-Malik's son Nasr on the throne and rule the state in his name. However, the Samanid family, their opposition, and the royal guard in Bukhara bypassed the young prince and installed Mansur instead. Bal'ami joined the new regime, while Alptegin, who was geographically distant from events in the capital, could do nothing. Alptegin was left isolated in Khurasan. Nasr ruled for only one day. If, as mentioned in the *Siyasatnama*, Alptegin had supported Mansur ibn Nuh, then another reason would have to be provided for their enmity.

The court officials sought to create a rift between the future ruler Mansur ibn Nuh and Alptegin, who had been governor in Khurasan for several years. They advised the amir to summon Alptegin to swear allegiance personally, and when he arrived, to imprison and kill him in order to rid themselves of this extremely powerful vassal [7.105].

Aware of Amir Mansur ibn Nuh's plans, Alptegin went to the bank of the Jayhun (Amu Darya) River and sent his officials and the Khurasan army to Bukhara. He himself said he would depart for India for a *ghazā* (holy war), explaining his decision as stemming from his old age and his unwillingness to fight against the dynasty he had served his entire life. Before leaving, he stayed in Balkh for a short time to gather troops [7.106]. At that time, he was commanding 30,000 men, and according to Nizam al-Mulk, he could have gathered an army of 100,000 and

seized control of Bukhara. But Alptegin, being a “noble servant,” declared to his men that he intended to leave the empire, sent his troops to Bukhara, and urged them to pledge allegiance to the new amir. He then departed from the Samanid state with a personal guard of 2,200 Turkic ghulam slave-soldiers. Under his own banner, he gathered another 800 cavalrymen and set out eastward to wage a holy war.

Nizam al-Mulk emphasizes how wealthy Alptegin was at the time of his departure. He notes that “he owned 500 villages in Khurasan and Transoxiana, and there was not a city in the Samanid realm where he did not have houses, gardens, inns, baths, and farms. In addition, he had one million sheep and over 100,000 cattle and horses.” While this may not be entirely accurate, it reflects the extraordinary wealth and power that Turkish hajibs at their peak could attain.

In response to the demands of his court officials, the Samanid amir dispatched an army of 16,000 men to pursue Alptegin, but they were caught in an ambush. Alptegin had established his base at a mountain pass known as the Khulm defile. He divided his army of 3,000 into three parts. Two of these divisions were hidden in the ravines on the right and left sides of the pass. With the remaining 1,000 troops, he moved along the valley, pretending to retreat. The Samanid forces pursued Alptegin through the pass. When half of the Samanid army had crossed to the other side, they saw Alptegin’s forces lined up for battle. Unable to organize themselves into formation in time, they were attacked. Meanwhile, the remaining Samanid troops attempting to cross the pass were ambushed from the rear by Alptegin’s hidden forces. The Samanid army was completely routed, and Alptegin and his forces seized their abandoned base. The spoils they acquired included horses, mules, gold, silver, silk, and slaves [7.105].

In Narshakhi's History of Bukhara, a brief mention of this event is found: Alptegin crosses the Jayhun River intending to capture the amir, but upon seeing the large size of the approaching army, he retreats. However, the amir appoints Muhammad ibn Abdurazzaq to prevent him from entering Nishapur, and Alptegin withdraws to Balkh. In response, Mansur ibn Nuh sends Ashas ibn Muhammad against him, and Alptegin, after being defeated in battle, retreats to Ghazna. Ashas ibn Muhammad also proceeds to Ghazna and captures it. Alptegin flees to Balkh, and after numerous battles, the amir offers him clemency and reinstates him into service [1.54]. Given that the work is dedicated to the history of the Samanid rulers and the sections following Abdulmalik’s reign were not written by the original author Narshakhi but were later additions by subsequent translators, we believe the narrative concludes with Alptegin’s surrender.

In this regard, Ibn al-Athir’s Al-Kamil fi’l-Tarikh states that in 962, Mansur ibn Nuh summons Alptegin to his court, but he refuses to come. In response, the amir dispatches an army, which Alptegin defeats, even capturing their commanders, including the amir’s uncle [9.469].

Alptegin then marches toward Ghazna and lays siege to it. Nizam al-Mulk notes that Alptegin issued a proclamation forbidding his troops from plundering the villages around Ghazna. According to Nizam al-Mulk, when one of Alptegin’s soldiers extorted a sack of straw and a chicken from a peasant and returned to camp, Alptegin reprimanded him, stating that the army was well-paid and should purchase what they needed rather than frighten the peasants. He then

had the soldier executed and his body displayed publicly. This act appears to have pleased the local population, who did not resist Alptegin's control of the region.

Thus, after seizing Ghazna and establishing it as his base, Alptegin launched several expeditions into India, capturing various territories before dying during one of these campaigns in 963 [7.112]. Since he had no sons, his affairs were continued by the Turkish slave Sabuktigin, whom he had purchased, raised, and trained from youth, and who went on to found the Ghaznavid dynasty. Sabuktigin married the daughter of the chief of Zabulistan and fathered Mahmud ibn Sabuktigin, the most prominent figure of the dynasty [7.113]. However, according to Gardizi's *Zayn al-Akhbar*, Alptegin died shortly after conquering Ghazna in 963. He was succeeded by his son Abu Ishaq Ibrahim, who ruled from 963 to 966. Abu Ishaq died without an heir, and command passed to one of the army officers, Bilgetegin, who ruled until 975 before dying childless as well. Another officer, Bōritigin, was elected and ruled until 977, when he was overthrown and replaced by Sabuktigin—Alptegin's most trusted slave and commander, and also his son-in-law. Sabuktigin is often regarded as the true founder of the Ghaznavid dynasty. All subsequent rulers of the dynasty were his descendants.

Therefore, much of the information about Alptegin is found in sources relating to the history of the Ghaznavid dynasty. In particular, Gardizi's *Zayn al-Akhbar* details Alptegin's service under the Samanids, his conquest of Ghazna, and his foundational role in the establishment of the Ghaznavid state. According to Gardizi, Alptegin was initially a Turkish slave serving in the Samanid court, who rose through the ranks due to his loyalty and military prowess. He was appointed *hajib al-hujjab* (chief of palace guards) under Samanid amir Nuh I (943–954), and later, under Nuh's son Abdulmalik I (954–961), he became governor of Balkh and in 961 was appointed military commander of Khurasan [6.62].

After the death of Abdulmalik I, Alptegin and his allies attempted to place Abdulmalik's young son Nasr on the throne. However, other powerful officials backed Mansur I and appointed him as the new amir. Mansur I consequently removed Alptegin from the governorship of Khurasan. Following these events, Alptegin journeyed to Balkh with his Turkish soldiers and Iranian *ghazis*. In 962, he managed to capture the city of Ghazna from Abu Bakr Lavik, a local ruler and relative of the ruler of Kabul (Kabulshah). The Samanids were content to recognize Alptegin in Ghazna as their sovereign and vassal. Although Alptegin succeeded in seizing Ghazna, for the next fifteen years he and his successors faced relentless struggle against the *Lo-ikhs* who sought to reclaim the area, aided by relatives in Kabul. Indeed, at one point Alptegin's son Abu Ishaq Ibrahim lost Ghazna to the *Lo-ikhs* and managed to recover it only with help from the Samanids in Bukhara. This is why, until the death of Alptegin's fourth successor Sabuktigin in 997, the rulers of Ghazna continued recognizing the Samanids as their sovereigns.

In Bayhaqi's *Tarikh-i Mas'udi*, it is stated: "During his service under the Samanids, Alptegin achieved many victories with his military abilities. He understood the strategic importance of Ghazna and seized this region into his control, thus heralding the beginning of a new era." [4.88] This underscores how crucial Alptegin was to the dynasty's development, even in the eyes of the Ghaznavids themselves.

During Sabuktigin's reign, the Ghaznavid territory expanded from southern Hindu Kush in Afghanistan to the Indus River in present-day Pakistan. Sabuktigin remained nominally a vassal of the Samanids, but by then their imperial power had weakened due to rebellions and internal disorder. Sabuktigin and his son Mahmud helped the Samanids restore order in 994; as a reward, Mahmud was appointed governor of Khurasan.

By 999, when Mahmud ascended the Ghaznavid throne, the Samanids had lost their power. They were surrounded by the Ghaznavids in the south and west, and the Karakhanid Turks in the east. In 999, Mahmud annexed Khurasan into the Ghaznavid realm; the Karakhanids took control of Transoxiana, effectively ending Samanid authority. Mahmud was the first Muslim ruler to assume the title "sultan."

Although the Ghaznavid Empire reached its greatest power and glory some forty years after Alptegin's death, its foundations were laid by this former hajib, who constructed one of the strongest military regimes of the 11th century. While the dynasty's rulers were not Alptegin's direct descendants, they were his former slave officers who seized Ghazna, expanded its reach, and eventually established the dynasty. Alptegin had trained, educated, promoted, and provided for Sabuktigin, whom he considered like a son. Indeed, relationships between military slaves (or even royal guards) and their patrons often resembled those between a father and his children, and slaves saw each other as brothers. Thus, Sabuktigin, though not blood-related, inherited Alptegin's legacy—deliberately or not—and passed this heritage on to his own descendants.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Alptegin initially served the Samanid state. During this period, he gained recognition as a military leader, drawing attention for his military skill and leadership. The internal conflicts and weakening of the Samanid state, along with Alptegin's growing influence in Khurasan and surrounding regions, provided him with the opportunity to act independently and play a significant role in the establishment of the Ghaznavid state. Alptegin holds an important place in the history of Central Asia. His activities within the Samanid state, his conquest of Ghazna, and the political steps he took that laid the foundations of the Ghaznavid dynasty had a profound and lasting impact. He was one of the first Turkish commanders to emerge as an independent power during the decline of the Samanid Empire and made a notable contribution to the political landscape of the medieval Muslim world.

Moreover, Alptegin played a major role in the spread of Islam. Under the rule of the Ghaznavid state—which continued his campaigns into India—Islamic religion and culture spread widely across the region.

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