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Mahmud of Ghazni

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Mahmud of Ghazni

Seventeen times, one ruler crossed into India. He never once stayed to govern it.

This lesson follows Mahmud of Ghazni. It covers his rise, his raids, the battles that opened India to him, the sack of Somnath, and the cultural capital he built at Ghazna.



Likely idealized portrait of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, enthroned in the pose of a Sasanian hero-king. Silver dish, early 11th century, State Hermitage Museum. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

At a glance

Five facts to hold on to.

- **998:** Mahmud became Sultan of Ghazna at age 27.
- **1001-1026:** about 17 expeditions into India.
- **1008:** the victory over Anandpal that opened the heart of India.
- **1018:** Kannauj was conquered.
- **1024-26:** the last campaign, which sacked Somnath.

Remember the contrast: Mahmud raided for wealth. Later invaders like Muhammad Ghori came to rule. Read Muhammad Ghori and the Ghurid Conquest for that contrast.

Who was Mahmud of Ghazni, and how did he rise?

How did Mahmud come to power?

Mahmud was born in 971 and died in 1030. He was the son of Sebuktigin.

Sebuktigin was a Turkish slave who became ruler of Ghazna in 977. He founded the Ghaznavid dynasty.

Mahmud took the throne in 998, aged 27. He is called Sultan of Ghazna from 998 to 1030.

He gave nominal loyalty to the Abbasid caliph. In return, the caliph accepted him as a lawful ruler.

Sources: britannica.com

How big was his empire?

Mahmud won his wealth in more than 20 successful expeditions. With it he laid the base of a vast empire.

The empire grew to include Kashmir, the Punjab and a large part of Iran.

It stretched from the Oxus river to the Indus valley. He also captured Rayy and Hamadan from the Buyids.

So India was only one part of his world. Much of his energy went to Central Asia and Iran.

Sources: britannica.com

> **Quick check 1.** Mahmud of Ghazni became Sultan in 998. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why did he come to India?

The main pull was wealth. India's temples stored great riches.

Mahmud is said to have vowed to invade India once a year.

In fact he led about 17 expeditions. That is fewer than one a year over his reign, so the vow was a goal, not a rule.

Sources: britannica.com

What happened in the raids into India?

What was the timeline of the raids?

The first large-scale campaign began in 1001. The last ended in 1026.

The early expeditions aimed at the Punjab and north-eastern India.

The final campaign went much farther. Mahmud reached Somnath, on the southern coast of what is now Gujarat.

The route shows a pattern. He began near his own border and moved deeper into India over time.

Sources: britannica.com

What happened in 1001?

His chief enemy was Jaipal, ruler of the Punjab.

Mahmud led about 15,000 horse. Jaipal had 12,000 horse, 30,000 foot soldiers and 300 elephants.

The armies met near Peshawar. Mahmud won, and Jaipal was captured.

Jaipal was later released. He gave up his throne to his son Anandpal, and then ended his own life.

Sources: britannica.com

> **Quick check 2.** Mahmud's first large-scale campaign in India began in 1001. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Why was 1008 so important?

Anandpal built a coalition of Indian rulers. The two armies faced each other for 40 days, between Und and Peshawar.

Then about 30,000 Khokar tribesmen charged. Anandpal's elephant fled in panic, and the Indian side broke.

This momentous victory opened the way for Mahmud to push into the heart of India.

Sources: britannica.com

What came after 1008?

A Kashmir expedition in 1015 failed.

In 1018 Mahmud conquered Kannauj. That was a major gain in the Gangetic plain.

He could not take the fortresses of Gwalior in 1022 and Kalinjar in 1023. Still, he forced them to pay tribute.

This shows that his aim was money, not rule. A tribute payment satisfied him as much as a conquest.

Sources: britannica.com

> **Quick check 3.** Mahmud captured the fortresses of Gwalior and Kalinjar. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What happened at Somnath?

The last expedition ran from 1024 to 1026. It reached the Kathiawar coast.

Mahmud sacked Somnath and its temple. He returned home in 1026.

In his final years he mostly fought tribes in Central Asia.

Somnath is the most famous raid. It is also why many later writers remember him mainly as a plunderer.

Sources: britannica.com



Somnath Temple on the Gujarat coast, rebuilt over several centuries after the raid. Photo: via Wikimedia Commons.

Think it through: why did Mahmud accept tribute at Kalinjar instead of fighting on?

Show the answer

Mahmud wanted wealth he could carry home. A long siege costs men and time. Tribute gave him the wealth without the cost, and he had no plan to rule the place.

What kind of capital did Ghazna become?

How did the wealth change Ghazna?

Mahmud turned Ghazna into a cultural centre that rivalled Baghdad.

He built colleges, gardens, mosques, palaces and caravansaries. A caravansary is an inn for travelling merchants.

His court drew scholars and poets. Al-Biruni was one of them.

So the same wealth that came from raids paid for learning back home.

Sources: britannica.com

What is the link with Ferdowsi?

The Persian poet Ferdowsi died in 1020. He completed his epic poem, the Shahnameh, at Mahmud's court about 1010.

The Shahnameh is the great epic of Persia. It tells the story of its kings.

This shows that Mahmud backed Persian culture, even though he was a Turkish ruler.

Sources: britannica.com

How did he treat his Indian subjects?

He did not treat his Indian subjects harshly. He did not force Islam on them.

He kept a large group of Hindu troops in his army. Conversion was never a condition of service.

This sits beside the raids on temples. History is not simple, so read both sides together.

Sources: britannica.com

> **Quick check 4.** Hindu soldiers served in Mahmud's army, and conversion was not required. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What happened to the dynasty?

Mahmud died in 1030. The Ghaznavid dynasty ruled from 977 to 1186.

Masud I lost to the Seljuqs at Dandanqan in 1040.

After that the Ghaznavids held eastern Afghanistan and northern India. Lahore fell to the Ghurids in 1186.

The Ghurids are the same dynasty line that Muhammad Ghori belongs to.

Sources: britannica.com

Which previous year questions link to this topic?

What did UPSC CSP 2022 ask about Somnath?

UPSC CSP 2022 asked which statements about Somnath Temple were correct. The correct pair: it is one of the twelve Jyotirlinga shrines, and Al-Biruni described it.

The trap: the 1951 Pran Pratishtha was done by President Rajendra Prasad, not Radhakrishnan. See UPSC CSP 2022 Q96.

What did CDS (II) 2020 ask about the Kitab-ul-Hind?

CDS (II) 2020 asked in which language Al-Biruni wrote the Kitab-ul-Hind. The answer is Arabic. See CDS (II) 2020 Q73.

> **Quick check 5.** Mahmud of Ghazni made the first conquest of Delhi. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Which mix-ups should you avoid?

Do not say Mahmud ruled India. He raided it and ruled from Ghazna.

Do not say the raids were exactly one per year. The count is about 17.

Do not say he took Gwalior and Kalinjar. He took tribute from them.

Do not mix Mahmud with Muhammad Ghori. Ghori came later and stayed to rule.

Sources: britannica.com

The whole story in five lines

- **998** — Mahmud took the throne of Ghazna after his father Sebuktigin and soon looked toward India.
- **1001–1026** — He led about 17 raids into India, mostly to seize the wealth stored in its temples.
- **1008** — His win over Anandpal, helped by a Khokar charge, opened the way into the heart of India.
- **1018** — He conquered Kannauj, but at Gwalior and Kalinjar he took tribute instead of the forts.
- **1024–26** — His last great raid sacked Somnath, and the plunder helped make Ghazna a rival to Baghdad.

Practice MCQs

1. In which year did Mahmud of Ghazni become Sultan of Ghazna?

A. 1030

B. 977

C. 1001

D. 998

See answer ↓

2. About how many expeditions into India did Mahmud lead?

A. About 17

B. About 5

C. About 40

D. About 100

See answer ↓

3. Near which city did Mahmud defeat Jaipal in 1001?

A. Lahore

B. Multan

C. Delhi

D. Peshawar

See answer ↓

4. Which city did Mahmud conquer in 1018?

A. Kannauj

B. Kalinjar

C. Kashmir

D. Gwalior

See answer ↓

5. Which Persian poet completed the Shahnameh at Mahmud's court about 1010?

A. Ferdowsi

B. Omar Khayyam

C. Rumi

D. Al-Biruni

See answer ↓

6. In which year did Lahore fall to the Ghurids, ending Ghaznavid rule in northern India?

A. 1040

B. 1206

C. 1186

D. 1030

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.**
   Britannica gives his rule as 998 to 1030. He ascended at age 27.
   ↑ Q1
2. **A.**
   Britannica says he led about 17 expeditions, from 1001 to 1026.
   ↑ Q2
3. **D.**
   The armies met near Peshawar. Jaipal was captured and later gave up his throne to his son Anandpal.
   ↑ Q3
4. **A.**
   Britannica lists the conquest of Kannauj in 1018. Gwalior and Kalinjar paid tribute but were not conquered.
   ↑ Q4
5. **A.**
   The Ghaznavid entry says Ferdowsi completed the Shahnameh at Mahmud's court about 1010.
   ↑ Q5
6. **C.**
   The Ghaznavids held eastern Afghanistan and northern India until Lahore fell to the Ghurids in 1186.
   ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** His rule ran from 998 to 1030, and he came to the throne aged 27. ↑ 1
2. **True.** The first large-scale campaign began in 1001 and the last ended in 1026.
   ↑ 2
3. **False.** He could not subdue them. He did collect tribute from both. ↑ 3
4. **True.** He kept a large contingent of Hindu troops and never made conversion a condition of service. ↑ 4
5. **False.** His raids ran from the Punjab to Kannauj and Somnath. The Delhi Sultanate came later, under the Ghurid line. ↑ 5

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