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GHAZNAVID LEISURE ACTIVITIES IN TERMEZ (11TH CENTURY): SOME IDEAS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

Abstract:

Ghaznavid relationships with Termez are often considered from a military and strategic point of view, as the city was a valuable bridgehead in Transoxiana against the Qarakhanids. On the other hand, the question of leisure activities is less often analysed by historians. We will be looking at two activities popular with the Ghaznavids at Termez, namely hunting and the organisation of festivities. We will ask why Mas'ūd (r. 1030-1040) sometimes came from far away to hunt or drink wine in the region: what environmental factors might explain these habits? How were the festivities organised and what was at stake? What role does the Amu Darya play in these events? We will be drawing on textual data (medieval sources, accounts by 19th-century travellers) and archaeological data, as well as on the natural sciences (archaeozoology, archaeobotany, ecology).

Article:

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Ghaznavids (r. 977-1186) were established in Khorassan but also possessed a number of territories in Transoxiana (FIGURE 1), including Termez [1, P.266]: this city, built in ancient times on the banks of the Amu Darya [2], still benefited in the Islamic era from its strategic position [1, P.76]. It was at the crossroads of the routes linking India, Afghanistan and Zerafshan, as well as the lands beyond, towards the Abbasid caliphate, Khorezm, Qarakhanid lands and even China. Dynastic histories and chronicles written in the

11<sup>th</sup> century bear witness to the military organisation put in place by the Ghaznavids to make Termez a bridgehead against their Qarakhanid rivals [3, *passim*; 4, P.235-240; 5]. These elements are often highlighted in medieval texts and modern studies, in connection with the construction of a bridge of boats by Maḥmūd b. Sebükteġin in 1025 and then by his son Mas'ūd in 1038 [3, III P.894; tr. II P.245]. Indeed, we know that the Amu Darya played the role of a political frontier on many occasions in the medieval Islamic period [6; 7]. Archaeology has revealed the fortifications erected by the Ghaznavids, particularly along the river [8; 9, P.55]. However, during the Ghaznavid period, Termez was also a popular place of leisure for the Ghaznavids: Mas'ūd b. Maḥmūd (r. 1030-1040) came there to hunt, drink wine and take part in festivities. Why did he come to Termez for these activities? What was the role of the Amu Darya? Our aim is to provide answers to these questions from an environmental history perspective. We will look at why the Ghaznavids came to hunt felines near Termez, and how the river was used to stage the extraordinary festivities that took place in April 1031.



**Figure 1. Carte des toponymes mentionnés dans l'article (au Khorassan et en Transoxiane)**  
DAO : A. Quer et C. Rhoné-Quer, fond de carte : Esri, GEBCO, DeLorme, NaturalVue

Figure 1. Map from : Rhoné Camille, « Faire ou défaire la frontière fluviale : penser et vivre l'Amou Darya au x<sup>e</sup> siècle », *Frontière.s*, numéro spécial *Les frontières de l'eau*, 7, décembre 2022, p. 57-67.

## I" LION" HUNTING

According to Bayhaqī, the Ghaznavid sultans often came to hunt and drink wine in the Termez region: it was a habit for them, both under Maḥmūd (r. 998-1030) and under his son Mas'ūd (*našāṭ-i šarāb wa-šayd kard bar jānib-i tirmiḍ bar 'ādat-i pidariš*) [3, I P.285 ; tr. I P.342]. Indeed, Mas'ūd came to practise these activities in April 1031 and March 1036. On both occasions, Mas'ūd came to hunt at Termez just before leaving Balkh for his capital, Ghazna, 20 days' journey away [3, II P.721; tr. II P.166]. This calendar raises questions: is the seasonal nature of the Termez hunting campaigns, which take place in spring each time, linked to a form of ritualization and staging? Was it simply a leisure activity for pleasure? Or was it a show of strength (Mas'ūd is said to have killed 4 wild beasts with his own hands) and part of a tradition established - at the very least - by Maḥmūd and which Mas'ūd wanted to emulate?

These hunting trips required the sultan to invest a lot of time. They needed a two-day journey to cover about 80 km from Balkh to the banks of the Amu Darya, via the stopover village of Siyāhgird. Mas'ūd was absent for a whole week, both in April 1031 [3, I P.285-287; tr. I P.342-345] and in March 1036 [3, II P.721; tr. II P.166]. However, a priori there were also lions in northern Afghanistan, including near Balkh [10, P.6b-7a]. The Ghaznavids' decision to move therefore meant that the banks of the Amu Darya and the area around Termez, on the right bank, were of particular interest to them.

Perhaps it has something to do with the animal species present in Termez. However, there is uncertainty about the species hunted by the Ghaznavids: are they really lions (*Panthera leo persica*) or tigers (*Panthera tigris*)? Bayhaqī uses the expression *šikār-i šīr* (*šikār* = "hunt"), yet the term *šīr* means both "lion" and "tiger" [11, P. 772b]. Travellers in the 19th century mainly spoke of tigers in the region: for example, Gabriel Bonvalot (1889) mentioned tigers eating camels that had come to drink in the river to the east of Termez [12, P.202-203].



Figure 2. Tugai and Amu Darya river in LABR (Bagai-Tugai). Picture: Camille Rhoné-Quer, July 2023.

On the other hand, we do not know where exactly Mas'ūd hunted: was he on the left bank, the right bank, or on the island of the prophet (Aral Payghambar)? Are there any hunting enclosures in the area? Whatever the answer, it is highly likely to be an area of tugai and reedbeds (FIGURE 2), as this ecosystem is suitable for both tigers and lions [10, P.6b]: the riparian forests provide easy access to water and their vegetation is home to many other mammals such as wild boar and Bukhara red deer (FIGURE 3), which are prized by both felines. In fact, the sultans also hunted other animal species. These animals, described without further precision as "game", (*dīgar šikār-hā*; *ṣayd*) are edible: they are eaten by the sultan but perhaps also offered at the banquet given the next day at Termez [3, I P.285-286; tr. I P.342-343].



Figure 3. Bukhara Red deer in LABR. Picture: Camille Rhoné-Quer, July 2023.

## II/THE AMU DARYA, A PLACE TO CELEBRATE

The Amu Darya played a central role in Ghaznavid celebrations. The banks of the river were a popular setting for Mas'ūd, who came there to drink wine at the beginning and end of his stay in *Rabi' II* 422/April 1031 [3, I P.344-345; tr. I P.287]. He begins by drinking wine on the banks of the Amu Darya (*bi-kirān-i jayhūn... dast bi-našāt wa-šarāb kardand*) as soon as he reaches the river; these libations last for three days and then, on the 4<sup>th</sup> day, he goes hunting, as mentioned above [3, I P.285; tr. I P.342]. He also drank until midnight on the eve of his departure for Balkh. In addition to these moments of private rejoicing, the Amu Darya was also the setting for public festivities attracting large numbers of people.

Indeed, on 20 April 1031, the day after the hunting party, a sumptuous festival was organised on the banks of the Amu Darya: the river seemed to play an essential role in the festivities, which contributed to making it exceptional, as Bayhaqī emphasised. Bayhaqī, who was present at the event, stressed that he had rarely seen celebrations similar to those at Termez elsewhere [3, I P.286; tr. I P.343]. In this context, the role of the river is both direct and indirect. The river plays an indirect role as a nourishing space: for example, during the banquet, game (*naḥčīr*) presumably caught on its banks is drawn from it, but also fish (*māhī*). The first archaeozoological data have in fact shown that around the 10<sup>th</sup> century the inhabitants of Termez consumed fish from the *Cyprinidae* family [13, P.9-10, 14-15].

The Amu Darya also played a direct role in the festival: although not all the details given by Bayhaqī are clear in terms of spatialization, a large proportion of the activities took place on the water or on the banks themselves. The citadel on the river bank was adorned with numerous

weapons. Infantry fighters and their officers were also on the right bank. Also present are 300 people who enliven the festival, namely Termez musicians/singers, dancers and drummers (*wa-bar-lab-i āb muṭribān-i tirmid wa-zanān-i pay-kūb wa-ṭabl-zan*) [3, I P.286; tr. I P.343].

The river is the setting and backdrop for the festival: Mas'ūd and some of his political and administrative elite (including the leading members of the chancellery) are on boats (*kāštī*). In other boats are the "good companions, musicians/singers and *ghulām-s*" (*naḏīmān wa-muṭribān wa-ḡulāmān dar kāštī-hā-yi dīgar nišastah būdand*) [3, I P.286; tr. I P.343]. All sail to the base of the citadel to receive the signs of obedience from the fortress commander and the officers and soldiers, to the sound of trumpets, drums and shouts. The boats did not serve as a ferry system; they were the support and venue for the festivities.

Most of the festivities are organised on boats and in the immediate vicinity of the river's waters, but this is made possible by the season chosen: the festival takes place on 20 April, that is probably before the period of snowmelt from the Pamirs, which significantly increases the level and flow of this snow-glacial river from May onwards, and even more so during the summer floods (June-August).

It was also on the river, aboard his boat, that the sultan received messengers who had come to inform him of the conquest of Makrān (in the south of present-day Iran and Pakistan). On hearing this good news, Mas'ūd granted various largesse to the inhabitants of Termez, namely tax exemptions (100,000 dirhams) for the population, but also the distribution of a further 100,000 dirhams divided between the garrison of the citadel on the one hand, and the musicians, singers and dancers of Termez on the other [3, I P.287; tr. I P.344]. The military elite of the Termez citadel were then invited to come to the left bank to receive rich gifts (robes of honour, ornaments made of precious materials) at the Sultan's camp, with the latter inviting them to continue their vigilance and defensive duties [3, I P.287; tr. I P.344]. As Mas'ūd says to explain his largesse, the city of Termez always brought good luck to his dynasty (*īn šahr-i šumā bar dawlat-i mā mubāarak budah ast hamīšah*) [3, I P.286; tr. I P.343]. While the military stakes and the need to encourage the loyalty of local forces to the Ghaznavids are obvious, it would be simplistic to consider that Termez and the Amu Darya only attracted the sultans out of strategic interest: the fact that Mas'ūd returned there to hunt in March 1036, without renewing similar festivities, testifies to his taste for this exceptional natural setting.

## CONCLUSION

The festivities and hunting parties organised by the Ghaznavids in Termez and on the banks of the Amu Darya were demonstrations of their power. Through their leisure activities, they sought to secure the support of the local population and elites, given the strategic importance of the city in controlling the river and defending themselves against the Qarakhanids. However, the stakes could not be reduced to military issues. The activities of the sultans Maḥmūd and then Mas'ūd bear witness to their personal attraction to this region, for the specific setting offered by the banks of the river, their vegetation and wildlife.

On these questions, data from ecologists and archaeozoologists complement textual sources and archaeological studies. However, there are still many mysteries surrounding the environmental setting of Termez in the Ghaznavid period. More archaeobotanical and archaeozoological data is needed, including on the island of the prophet (Aral Payghambar): although it has played an essential role in the strategic position of Termez over the centuries, it remains very poorly known.

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