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CENTRALIZATION OF MILITARY AFFAIRS AND MILITARY ART UNDER THE SAMANID DYNASTY

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Abstract

This paper examines the formation of the military system in the Samanid state during the 9th–10th centuries, the consolidation of centralized governance, the organization of a regular army and court guard, the mechanisms of material provisioning for troops, and the methods of conducting warfare. A defining characteristic of Samanid military capacity was the synthesis of local and Turkic military traditions, the primacy of cavalry, and the maintenance of military discipline and central oversight. Primary source evidence indicates that Samanid military power rested not only on the numerical strength of its forces, but equally on the quality of command, financial sustainment, mobilization capacity, and tactical preparedness.

Keywords: Samanids, military system, standing army, ghulam soldiers, Dīwān al-Jaysh, Dīwān al-Barīd, iqṭāʿ, cavalry, Turkic military tradition, military tactics.

Introduction

The 9th–10th centuries represent a new phase in the military history of Turan. During this period, combat readiness, the art of commanding armies, military logistics, and armament systems underwent considerable development. These changes were closely connected to the consolidation of the Samanid dynasty, which brought a large portion of the region's territories under a single political center. An effective military apparatus was indispensable for maintaining state authority, repelling external threats, and ensuring order across the frontier territories.

Written sources confirm the region's considerable military potential. The 10th-century Arab geographer Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad ibn Ḥawqal, in his Kitāb Ṣūrat al-Arḍ, observes that the level of military preparedness and weaponry in Chach and Farghana was particularly high [1; 2]. According to his account, even ordinary townspeople were capable of equipping 100 to 500 cavalrymen. This suggests that during the Samanid period, not only the state army but the population's general mobilization capacity was substantial.

From this perspective, it is more productive to study the Samanid military system not simply as a history of state armies, but as an interconnected whole encompassing political centralization, economic provisioning, mass mobilization, and military administration.

Formation and Centralization of the Samanid Military System

In developing the military system during the Samanid period, considerable attention was devoted to the social composition of the army, the recruitment of professional forces, the regular training of soldiers, and their equipping with contemporary weaponry. The influence of Turkic military traditions was equally considerable. The organization of troops in decimal units of tens, hundreds, and thousands; the deployment of cavalry across center and flanks; the use of bow and lance on horseback; feigned retreat and rapid flanking maneuvers — all represented characteristic expressions of that tradition [3; 4].

A further defining feature of the Samanid army was systematic mobilization, strict discipline, and centralized oversight. According to Ibn Ḥawqal, even in instances of temporary disarray during

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battle, Samanid forces were able to regroup and restore fighting order within a short time [3]. This resilience owed much to the ghulam soldiers distributed throughout the army, to rapid replacement of casualties, to the prevention of unauthorized dispersal, and to central command [4].

The military policy of Ismāʿīl ibn Aḥmad was particularly consequential in this process. Prior to his reign, a portion of Samanid forces had consisted of levied civilians, ghāzīs, and contingents tied to local rulers — forces over which the amīr's direct oversight was limited. Under Ismāʿīl ibn Aḥmad, this system was fundamentally revised, with a sustained effort to build a regular army directly subordinate to the amīr.

The essence of this reform lay in the fact that the newly constituted army now answered not to dihqāns or local intermediaries, but directly to the will of the amīr and his trusted commanders. This arrangement strengthened centralized military command, enhanced security, and sustained a permanent force of specially trained soldiers. Sources indicate that this system retained its significance well into the subsequent Ghaznavid and Seljuk periods.

The Military Dīwān and the Mechanism of Army Administration

The foundation of Samanid state governance was a system of centralized court institutions and dīwāns. Narshakhī records that ten principal dīwāns operated within the state. Several of these served the direct or indirect needs of the military sphere. Azamat Ziyā likewise devoted particular attention to the functions and inter-relationships of these dīwāns within Samanid state administration.

The principal institution directly concerned with military affairs was the Dīwān al-Jaysh (Military Dīwān). It oversaw the organizational, financial, and administrative aspects of the army. The dīwān was headed by the Ṣāḥib Dīwān al-Jaysh, who occupied a prominent position in central state administration [2].

The Military Dīwān was not limited to a central bureau in the capital; it maintained subdivisions in the provinces. Its lower assemblies handled document management, soldier registration, military inspection, and the distribution of pay. The Taqrīr fixed soldiers' salaries and payment schedules; the ʿArḍ inspected the army's combat readiness, equipment, and horses; the Muqābala compared the registered roster against the actual strength present; and the ʿAṭāʾ wa Tafrīqa oversaw the distribution of pay and provisions [12].

Military administration under the Samanids thus operated not in an improvised manner but according to a defined administrative order. The formal registration of a soldier, his passing of military inspection, and only thereafter his receipt of pay reflects the integration of financial and military oversight into a unified system.

The Dīwān al-Barīd and Military Intelligence

The Dīwān al-Barīd also played an important role in Samanid state security. While its primary function was to ensure the flow of dispatches and postal correspondence, the dīwān additionally conducted covert surveillance of state officials and military commanders, and gathered intelligence on the outlying territories [4].

Sources record that the salaries of barīd officials were set on a par with those of significant officeholders such as qāḍīs and shiḥnas. Ibn Ḥawqal places the monthly salary of the Nishapur barīd official at 3,000 dirhams; those of Farghana, Herat, Khwarazm, and Balkh at 1,000 dirhams; Samarkand at 750 dirhams; and Chach at 700 dirhams [6]. These figures indicate that the barīd service was not a simple postal system but a vital component of state oversight and security.

An instructive example of the barīd network's operational speed is provided by the episode involving the Chinese envoys who arrived at the Samanid court in 938. When news of their arrival reached Farghana, Samanid forces along their route were placed on combat readiness [3]. The rapid transmission of intelligence to the center, and the swift relay of orders from the center to the localities, was thus a critical factor in the effectiveness of military administration.

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Army Composition and Military Strata

The Samanid army was not uniform in composition. Its essential core consisted of a permanent court guard and, in particular, ghulam soldiers who had undergone specialized training. They were directly subordinate to the ruler and served as the principal military support of the court and state authority. Alongside them existed provincial levies, mutaṭawwiʿa (volunteers), military groups drawn from the urban population, and auxiliary forces recruited in response to specific political circumstances.

The ghulam system was one of the most consequential characteristics of Samanid military history. Ghulams underwent specialized military training, were maintained at state expense, and could rise through the military hierarchy to senior positions. Over time, some became major commanders and governors. The careers of Alptigīn, the commanders associated with the Sīmjūrid family, Qārātigīn, Fāʾiq al-Khāṣṣa, and Bektūzūn provide clear illustrations of this trajectory [3].

However, the growing power of ghulam commanders eventually became a liability for the state. The necessity of providing them with regular pay, territorial prerogatives, and various privileges placed a heavy burden on the state treasury. As the regime's economic resources contracted, the political autonomy of ghulam commanders and their tendency toward centrifugal independence grew correspondingly [3].

The mutaṭawwiʿa — volunteers — also occupied an important position within the army. They participated primarily in the defense of the frontiers and in religiously motivated military campaigns. The account of Qāḍī Zubayr shows them appearing as a significant military force [5]. The ayyārs, drawn from urban craftsmen and youth, maintained public order in peacetime and served as lightly armed infantry in wartime [2].

Provincial forces likewise formed an important link in the Samanid military system. In some cases these contingents were sustained through iqṭāʿ grants. During the Samanid period, the iqṭāʿ differed from the classical landed estate institutions of later centuries: it primarily denoted the right to collect taxes from a defined territory in order to finance military service and cover soldiers' expenses [5; 6].

Military Provisioning and Soldier Compensation

One of the essential foundations of Samanid military capacity was a system of regular army financing. Payment to soldiers was structured differently according to military category and service status. Three principal forms of payment existed: Ḥisāb al-ʿIshrīnīya, Ḥisāb al-Jund, and Ḥisāb al-Murtazaqa. The core army and court guard belonging to the first category received regular payments throughout the year, while other military groups received pay two or three times annually.

Priority was accorded above all to the provisioning of ghulams, elite soldiers, and high-ranking commanders. The structure of pay distribution itself signals the state's perception of this military stratum as its primary political base.

Pay distribution was not a simple financial transaction. It was coordinated with military inspection. Under the direction of the ʿArīḍ, soldiers were called forward individually by name, and their combat readiness, equipment, and horses were examined. Pay was issued only to those who successfully passed the inspection. This procedure linked the quality of military service directly to financial incentive [1].

On occasion, supplementary grants — ʿaṭiyya — were awarded in addition to regular pay. When a new ruler ascended to power, such disbursements served as a means of securing the loyalty of soldiers and commanders and forestalling potential unrest [2].

According to Ibn Ḥawqal, despite the tax burden during the Samanid period being comparatively light relative to some other Muslim polities, rulers endeavored to pay soldiers at a high rate [32]. Military finance was thus one of the central priorities of state economic policy.

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Armament and Military Technical Provisioning

The development of weapons production during the Samanid period was directly connected to the region's economic resources. Iron deposits in the territories of Farghana, Kabul, and Ustrushana provided the raw material base for weapons manufacture, while Khurasan served as one of the principal centers for the production of quality military equipment [3; 4].

Weapons were classified by function into offensive and defensive categories. Infantry were armed primarily with bows, swords, and short spears; cavalrymen were equipped with long lances, swords, shields, helmets, and armor. Ranged archery played a significant role in the opening phase of battle. The design, materials, and arrowheads were adapted for effective use in specific combat situations [3].

The spear was one of the main weapons in both mounted and dismounted combat. Sources provide information about various types of long and short spears, including those adapted for cavalrymen and specialized hooked lances used during sieges [4]. The sword was employed in the decisive close-quarters phase of battle.

Defensive equipment was also considerably developed. Shields were produced from steel, leather, or wood; armor protected the body against arrows, lances, and sword blows. For some heavy cavalrymen, the horse itself was fitted with specialized protective equipment — an indication of the emergence of heavily armored cavalry units [5].

Military Dress and Its Socio-Political Significance

The question of military dress is also noteworthy in the Samanid period. Some studies have suggested that Samanid troops uniformly wore black garments, but the source evidence does not support this claim in absolute terms.

Ibn Ḥawqal notes that the fabric known as al-widāriyya, produced in Widar near Samarkand, was widely used among military men. According to him, this fabric was of a natural yellowish hue and was used by ordinary soldiers as well [6]. Niẓām al-Mulk's Siyāsatnāma records that court ghulams wore garments of different fabrics and colors according to their grade of service. References are made to the use of zandanachī cloth in the early years of service, and subsequently of finer fabrics such as dārāʾī and ganjī [7; 8].

Military dress in the Samanid army thus served not merely as a political symbol, but as a marker of a soldier's length of service and his socio-military standing.

Samanid Military Art and Battle Tactics

The superiority of the Samanid army was determined not only by the size and armament of its forces, but also by command and tactical sophistication on the battlefield. Sources record that the army was deployed in battle formations known as Kurdāj and the "Five Pillars" (panj rukn) [8].

The panj rukn system consisted of a vanguard, a rearguard, two wings, and a center where the supreme commander was stationed. This arrangement served to centralize battlefield command and ensure coordination among the various detachments [8].

The maneuvering characteristic of Turkic military tradition — feigned retreat, encirclement, and rapid assault — played a significant role in Samanid operational practice. In the battle of Isḥāqābād in 940, Abū ʿAlī ibn Muḥtāj delivered a powerful strike to the enemy center and then deliberately withdrew, drawing the opponent into pursuit. The units on the flanks then enveloped the enemy. This tactic aimed to dislodge the opponent from an advantageous combat position [2].

The engagements between Ismāʿīl ibn Aḥmad and ʿAmr ibn al-Layth of the Saffarid dynasty are also significant from the perspective of military art. In the initial encounter, the Samanids exploited the crossing of the Amu Darya to strike the enemy's forward elements. In the subsequent phase, tactics of diversion and encirclement were employed [9].

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Ibn al-Athīr's account shows that in these battles Samanid operations were characterized by speed and initiative [9]. The decisions of Ismāʿīl ibn Aḥmad were grounded not merely in numerical superiority but in the effective exploitation of terrain, timing, and the psychological condition of the enemy.

In the battle of Herat in 994, diplomatic and psychological stratagems figured alongside tactical considerations. Sabuktigīn managed to sow distrust within the army of Abū ʿAlī Sīmjūrī by disseminating false intelligence to the opposing camp. Political treachery at the decisive moment then triggered the disintegration of the enemy force, resulting in victory for the Samanids and their allies [1].

Samanid military art thus combined conventional weaponry and troop organization with reconnaissance, psychological influence, diplomatic maneuver, and rapid offensive tactics into a coherent whole.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Military System

The foremost strength of the Samanid military system lay in its centralization, regular financing, control over personnel, and capacity to unite diverse military strata behind a common political objective.

Primary sources offer no single authoritative figure for the size of the Samanid army. Some references mention a force of 300,000 men; however, comparative analysis suggests this figure should be understood not as a permanent standing army but as the total strength assembled through extensive mobilization [7]. Evidence from various campaigns indicates that the Samanid regular army was substantially large, though well below 300,000.

It is therefore more appropriate to assess the strength of the Samanid army not by its absolute numbers, but by its ability to integrate a permanent guard, provincial forces, and volunteers into a single operational whole.

The system also had inherent weaknesses. The high cost of maintaining a standing army — in salaries and provisions — placed a serious burden on the state treasury. Sources record that economic difficulties became acute from the reign of Nūḥ ibn Naṣr onward; in certain regions, military expenditures exceeded local revenues, leading to upward pressure on taxation [4].

As Jürgen Paul has noted, the growing prominence of ghulam commanders in political life disrupted the balance between their material interests and the economic capacity of the central authority [3]. In this way, the standing force bound by personal loyalty — the very strength of the Samanid military system — became in time one of the factors in the dynasty's financial and political decline.

Conclusion

During the 9th–10th centuries, military organization in Samanid Turan achieved a high degree of centralization and structural complexity. Its foundation was a multi-tiered army composed of a regular force, a court guard, provincial levies, and volunteers.

The formalization of military administration through the Dīwān al-Jaysh, the official registration of soldiers, the holding of regular military reviews, and the provision of regular pay all attest to the high level of organization attained by the Samanid army [2; 3].

A defining characteristic of Samanid military art was the deep integration of Turkic military traditions into the state military system. The role of cavalry, maneuvering, feigned retreat, encirclement, and rapid movement were central features of Samanid operational practice [3; 8; 2].

The armament system was likewise calibrated to the function of different troop types, with bows, lances, swords, shields, and armor employed in combination [3–5]. Military dress was linked to grade of service and social standing.

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Most significantly, under the Samanids, military power ceased to be a discrete administrative function and instead developed into an integrated whole — organically bound to political centralization, economic provisioning, intelligence oversight, and administrative governance. Yet the weakening of the economic foundations underpinning this centralized and costly military apparatus subsequently exerted a negative effect on the political stability of the state [3; 4].

From this standpoint, the study of Samanid military history is valuable not only for understanding the structure and armament of 9th–10th-century armies, but for grasping the relationship between military power, economic capacity, and central authority in Turanian statecraft.

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