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Research Article

A Historical and Architectural Comparison of the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez

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ABSTRACT

This study compares the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez as two important historical, architectural, and military monuments of Afghanistan. The main objective of the study is to examine and explain the similarities and differences between these two historical structures in terms of historical antiquity, function, construction materials and techniques, architectural characteristics, and artistic value. The findings of the study indicate that both Bala Hissars have historical backgrounds and pre-Islamic origins and played important roles in different historical periods, particularly in military and defensive contexts. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni, closely associated with the historic city of Ghazni and particularly with the Ghaznavid period, developed into an important political, military, and cultural center. In contrast, the Bala Hissar of Gardez, owing to its strategic location, was used as a defensive and military center during various pre-Islamic and Islamic periods. In terms of construction materials, both structures employed local materials such as stone, mud brick, earth, and wood; however, differences can be observed in their architectural elements and spatial organization. The Bala Hissar of Gardez contains circular and rectangular towers, defensive and residential sections, and evidence of different phases of construction and reconstruction, whereas the Bala Hissar of Ghazni is more closely associated with the defensive structure of the historic city of Ghazni and architectural elements of the Islamic periods, particularly the Ghaznavid period. In terms of artistic value, the decorative features, architectural elements, and archaeological finds associated with both monuments demonstrate the influence and intermingling of various cultural and artistic traditions throughout the history of Afghanistan. Overall, the comparison of these two Bala Hissars demonstrates that, although both share significant similarities in terms of defensive function, strategic location, and the use of local construction materials, the differences in their historical backgrounds, architectural structures, and artistic evidence reflect distinct historical and cultural developments in the two regions. Further preservation, documentation, and archaeological research at both monuments, particularly the Bala Hissar of Gardez, where extensive scientific studies have not yet been conducted, are essential for a better understanding of the history, architecture, and civilization of Afghanistan.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan, our beloved country, has throughout history been a cradle of various civilizations in the heart of Asia and has preserved unique heritage from ancient times to the present day. This ancient land has left behind remains from the Old Stone Age to the present, which have at times become intermingled with foreign cultures and civilizations, including those of the Achaemenids, Greeks, Gupta India, and others. This cultural intermingling entered the country as a result of military campaigns and conquests by foreign powers, and the influence of various cultures can clearly be observed in fortresses, gates, vessels, statues, images, wall paintings and motifs, and coins.

Among these cultural remains are the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez, two significant historical fortifications that represent important components of Afghanistan's military, architectural, and cultural heritage. These structures, located in different geographical and historical contexts, served primarily defensive and military functions and reflect the architectural traditions that developed in Afghanistan over different historical periods. The study of these monuments is essential for understanding the history, architecture, and civilization of Afghanistan.

2. Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

Main Research Question

What are the similarities and differences between the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez in terms of historical antiquity, function, construction materials and techniques, architectural characteristics, and artistic value?

Sub-Questions

1. What is the historical background and chronology of each Bala Hissar?
2. What materials and construction techniques were used in the construction of each Bala Hissar?
3. What are the architectural characteristics and spatial organizations of the two Bala Hissars?
4. What artistic and cultural evidence is associated with each Bala Hissar?
5. What factors have contributed to the preservation or deterioration of these monuments over time?

3. Research Methodology

This research adopts a comparative-historical and descriptive-analytical methodology to examine and compare the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez. The primary objective is to systematically document, analyze, and compare these two historical fortifications in terms of historical antiquity, function, construction materials and techniques, architectural characteristics, and artistic value.

3.1 Research Design

This is a qualitative, comparative-historical study. The design focuses on the collection, verification, and interpretation of primary and secondary historical, archaeological, and architectural sources to reconstruct the history and architectural characteristics of the two Bala Hissars within their respective historical contexts. This approach enables a systematic comparison of the two monuments across multiple dimensions.

3.2 Data Collection (Source Selection)

The data for this study were collected through systematic library research and documentary analysis. The sources were selected based on their relevance to the Bala Hissar of Ghazni, the Bala Hissar of Gardez, and the broader history of military architecture and cultural heritage in Afghanistan.

Primary Sources: The analysis is based on historical texts, geographical accounts, and archaeological reports concerning the two Bala Hissars. These include the works of medieval historians, geographers, and travelers such as Al-Muqaddasi, as well as modern archaeological survey reports and documentation from the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Secondary Sources: The study relies extensively on modern scholarly works, including books, journal articles, and research reports by Afghan and international scholars. Key sources include works by Sultan Ahmad (1987), Azimi (2011), Khalili (2020), Osmani (2016), Faizi, and Hotak (2016).

These sources were used to contextualize the historical and architectural information and to verify claims regarding the chronology, function, and architectural features of the two monuments.

Field Documentation: Photographic evidence, including historical photographs from the Siraj al-Akhbar Afghan and modern documentation, was also consulted to understand the physical characteristics and changes to the structures over time.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the following analytical approaches:

Historical Analysis: The historical background of each Bala Hissar was reconstructed through the examination of historical texts, archaeological reports, and scholarly interpretations. Particular attention was paid to establishing the chronology of construction, reconstruction, and use across different historical periods, from pre-Islamic to Islamic times.

Comparative Analysis: The two Bala Hissars were systematically compared across multiple dimensions, including:

1. Historical antiquity and chronology
2. Function and strategic importance
3. Construction materials and techniques
4. Architectural elements and spatial organization
5. Artistic and decorative features
6. Archaeological finds and cultural evidence

Architectural Analysis: The architectural characteristics of each structure were analyzed based on available descriptions, photographs, and archaeological reports, focusing on construction techniques, materials, spatial organization, defensive features (towers, walls, gates, moats), and evidence of different construction phases.

Artistic and Cultural Analysis: The decorative elements, iconographic evidence, and archaeological finds associated with each site were examined to understand the cultural and artistic traditions reflected in the monuments. This included analysis of plasterwork, tilework, brickwork, and significant finds such as the ivory statue of Ganesha from Gardez.

3.4 Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is the limited availability of systematic archaeological excavation data for both sites, particularly for the Bala Hissar of Gardez, where extensive scientific studies have not yet been conducted. The reliance on secondary sources and documentary evidence, rather than direct archaeological investigation, restricts the depth of analysis. Furthermore, the destruction and deterioration of both structures over time, particularly as a result of conflict and neglect, have limited the available evidence for architectural analysis. The study does not include field surveys or primary archaeological excavation. Additionally, access to some historical documents and records was restricted, which may

have limited the comprehensiveness of the historical reconstruction.

4. Literature Review

The study of historical fortifications in Afghanistan has attracted the attention of numerous scholars, historians, and archaeologists. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez, as two significant examples of military architecture, have been discussed in various historical and archaeological works.

Historical Sources: Medieval historians and geographers have provided valuable accounts of these fortifications. Al-Muqaddasi, the Arab geographer, described the fortress of Ghazni during the reign of Sebuktigin, noting that it had four gates and served as the residence of kings (Nasrin, 2010, p. 38). Al-Qifti and other historians have also mentioned the strategic importance of these fortifications. These early sources provide foundational information about the historical context and significance of these structures.

Modern Scholarship: In the modern period, several scholars have contributed to the study of these monuments. Azimi (2011) discussed the Bala Hissar of Ghazni as a fine example of military fortifications in Afghanistan, emphasizing its strategic position and architectural significance. Hotak (2016) examined the characteristics of Islamic-period monuments in Afghanistan, including the Bala Hissar of Ghazni. Osmani (2016) explored the historical development of Kafir Qalas and other fortifications in Afghanistan, providing comparative insights into architectural traditions.

Archaeological Studies: Faizi and Khalili have conducted research on the Bala Hissar of Gardez, examining its historical background, strategic importance, and architectural features. However, these studies have been limited by the lack of systematic archaeological excavation at the site. The Ministry of Information and Culture has documented the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and other historical sites in Afghanistan, but comprehensive archaeological investigations remain limited.

Comparative Studies: While individual studies of these fortifications exist, comprehensive comparative research examining the similarities and differences between the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez has been limited. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a systematic comparison of these two important historical monuments across multiple dimensions.

Research Gap: Despite the historical and architectural importance of these two Bala Hissars, extensive scientific and academic archaeological activities have not yet been conducted at either site, particularly at Gardez. The limited archaeological excavations and scientific investigations make it difficult to establish the exact chronology and different phases of construction with certainty. This study contributes to addressing this gap by synthesizing available historical and archaeological evidence and providing a systematic comparative analysis.

5. Bala Hissar of Ghazni

Ghazni is one of the ancient and central provinces of Afghanistan, which has passed through various historical and archaeological periods and has left behind numerous remains and evidence. Through archaeological research and excavations, archaeologists have succeeded in discovering archaeological sites and remains such as Dasht-e Nawur of Ghazni, Tepe Sardar, Godal-e Ahangaran, Jaghatu, buildings and palaces of the Islamic period, particularly the Ghaznavid period, each of which represents the beliefs, traditions, art, history, and civilization of this land (Faiz, 2019, p. 39).

Ghazni is located 135 kilometers southwest of Kabul, in the middle of the Kabul–Kandahar highway. With its long and ancient history, this province has passed through various prehistoric archaeological periods and historical periods. At one time, it was one of the provinces of Zabulistan and for a period it was the center of the province of Arachosia (present-day Kandahar). According to the notes of the Greek historian Ptolemy, Ghazni was considered one of the small commercial markets during antiquity. This province was conquered by Cyrus II, the Achaemenid king, in the sixth century BC and came under the control of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. From the second century BC to the seventh century AD, Ghazni was one of the Buddhist centers of Central Asia. With the arrival of the Muslim Arab armies, the inhabitants of Ghazni converted to Islam, and in the tenth century AD, corresponding to the fourth century of the Solar Hijri calendar, it was selected as the capital of the Ghaznavid dynasty, particularly during the reign of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, who was one of the most powerful rulers in the Islamic world. In addition to expanding their conquests and geographical territory, the Ghaznavid kings also devoted attention to the construction of minarets, gardens, palaces, and the promotion of knowledge and culture. Ghazni during the Ghaznavid period became a center for the gathering of hundreds of literati, poets, mystics, and scholars.

When a visitor enters this ancient city, his or her eyes first encounter a fortified citadel that has established itself among the mountains on top of a hill, surrounded by numerous settlements and villages. In the past, the city of Ghazni was surrounded on the outside by wide and deep moats, while its walls were constructed of pakhsa and mud brick, and in some places of fired brick. Its towers were semi-circular and separated from one another by short distances, with the distance between the towers estimated at 15–25 meters. Numerous ribats and caravanserais existed around the city, and these ribats and caravanserais were also fortified like the city itself (Faizi, p. 10).

Among the historical monuments and magnificent manifestations of the knowledge, culture, and civilization of our beloved homeland are the Bala Hissar and the historical minarets of the city of Ghazni. In this regard, the city of Ghazni was the center of the political and military administration of the kings and possessed strategic importance, and its Bala Hissar was considered impregnable. As Wakili Popalzai writes in his important work *Ghazna dar Do Qarn* (Ghazni in Two Centuries): "During the siege of Ghazni, and for secure defense, underground structures were constructed, where no one except

persons of authority was permitted to enter" (Nasrin, 2010, p. 31).

The Bala Hissar of Ghazni had dark, narrow, and underground passages that were used during times of siege. It was damaged several times by attackers; nevertheless, the initial traces of this structure still remain. In 1325 AH, corresponding to 1286 SH, the photographic delegation of Amir Habibullah Khan, including Rahmatullah Khan, Abdul Samad Khan, Muhammad Sadiq Khan, and Muhammad Rahim Khan, photographed the city of Ghazni. Some of these photographs were reproduced in *Siraj al-Akhbar Afghan*, showing its initial condition. In 1310–1311 SH, a military barracks was constructed here according to a new system, which was very attractive to tourists and travelers. There was a public passage in the Bala Hissar of Ghazni, which in reality had been constructed on the Kabul–Kandahar highway for surveillance purposes. This public passage served as a guard post during the period of the Ghaznavid kings.

Al-Muqaddasi, the Arab geographer who had obtained a map of the city of Ghazni during the reign of Sebuktigin, writes the following about it: "There was a fortress in the middle of the city (Bala Hissar), where the kings resided. It had four gates, and several markets were also located there. This fortress and city were developed by Yaqub, Umar, and Laith" (Nasrin, p. 38).

Military and defensive cities that were established through strong fortresses on elevated locations such as hills, mountains, and rocks gradually developed into large cities (Azimi, 2011, p. 370).

Across the lands of this country, such structures can be observed in the form of ruins. The strong and magnificent fortification of the city of Ghazni, situated on the summit of a hill overlooking the city, possesses considerable value and importance both in terms of its strategic position as a defensive and military fortification and in terms of its architectural and historical significance. Unfortunately, the fame and value of the historic city of Ghazni have been overshadowed by the archaeological importance and popularity of Balkh and Herat, although Ghazni played a major role in the culture and civilization of Central Asia and was regarded as an important center along the Silk Road. Sultan Mahmud, who returned to Ghazni with vast amounts of wealth and various war spoils from India and other lands, spent part of them on beautifying and constructing his capital. Although with the rise of the Ghurids, the rule of the Ghaznavids came to an end, and with Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat becoming capitals, Ghazni retained a secondary role for a long time. However, in 1839, following the British invasion and the siege of the Ghazni citadel, Ghazni once again became internationally renowned. Despite the strength and impenetrability of this fortification, the British captured it through its wooden gates, which were vulnerable to gunpowder and artillery (Azimi, p. 371).

The Ghazni citadel is undoubtedly considered one of the finest examples of military fortifications in the country from an architectural perspective, and the old city of Ghazni developed

around the citadel. This city has three passages on its northern, western, and southwestern sides, known as Bahlul, Bazar, and Kang. In a part of the city that is currently deteriorating, narrow markets—less than 2 meters wide—can be observed, where there were mostly shops for textile merchants, furriers, goldsmiths, coppersmiths, and others. These shops were constructed in such a way that they were connected to one another, while around the markets were the houses of the inhabitants, constructed irregularly from mud brick in two or three stories. On the eastern side of the city, remains and ruins from historical periods can be observed. Around the city of Ghazni, there are also tall and magnificent towers that formed the defensive system of the old city of Ghazni. The citadel and Bala Hissar of Ghazni are valuable legacies of the past, embodying a mixture of enduring culture and architecture, and require the attention of the responsible authorities so that they may be protected from natural and human hazards and erosion, thereby preserving a part of the country's history (Azimi, p. 372).

The Bala Hissar is located in the center of the city and is now partially ruined. Along the walls, surveillance and watchtowers were constructed, numbering 36 towers in total. In the past, the old city had four gates, which are still identifiable, as well as a small green square used for keeping the royal horses, and a large congregational mosque that resembled pre-Islamic temples, located to the east of Shah Bahar Square (Deputy Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Information and Culture, p. 15).

According to scholars, military and defensive cities were established through strong fortresses on elevated locations such as hills, mountains, and rocks and gradually developed into large cities (Hotak, 2016, p. 85).

The strong and magnificent fortification of the city of Ghazni, situated on the summit of a hill overlooking the city, possesses particular value both because of its strategic position as a defensive and military fortification and because of its architectural and historical significance. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni is a silent testimony to the rich history of this land. As an architectural monument constructed approximately 4,000 years ago, it is clearly and distinctly significant as a remnant of the rule of Mahmud and Masud of Ghazni. Sultan Mahmud, who returned to Ghazni with vast amounts of wealth and various war spoils from India and other lands, devoted part of them to the construction and development of his capital. With the decline of the Ghaznavid dynasty and the transfer of the capital to Herat, Kandahar, and Kabul, Ghazni retained its secondary role for a long period.

However, in 1839, following the British invasion and the siege of the Bala Hissar of Ghazni, the city of Ghazni once again became internationally renowned. Despite the strength and impenetrability of this fortification, the British captured it through its wooden gates, which were vulnerable to gunpowder and artillery. The Ghazni citadel is undoubtedly considered one of the finest examples of military fortifications in the country from an architectural perspective, and the old city of Ghazni developed around this citadel. This fortification has three passages on its northern, western, and southwestern sides,

known as "Bahlul," "Baza," and "Kink." In a part of the city that is currently deteriorating, there are narrow markets, including shops for textile merchants, furriers, goldsmiths, and coppersmiths. Near the Bala Hissar, residential houses constructed of mud brick in two or three stories have been built. Around the Bala Hissar of Ghazni, there are tall and magnificent towers that demonstrate the defensive position of the old city of Ghazni and preserve a valuable heritage of the past, incorporating elements of culture and architecture, which requires greater attention from the authorities and cultural figures (Hotak, p. 87).

6. Bala Hissar of Gardez

Among these cultural remains is the Bala Hissar of Gardez, which is located at 33 degrees and 16 minutes north latitude and 69 degrees and 14 minutes east longitude, at an elevation of 2,219 meters above sea level. This ancient and historic city is situated 120 kilometers south of Kabul and is considered one of the important historic cities in the center of Paktia Province. In this historic and cultural city, there is a rectangular Bala Hissar measuring 350×40 meters, which possesses political, military, and strategic significance.

This military and historic fortress, constructed with stone fortifications, was used over many years by various kings, sultans, and rulers of Afghanistan. Although scholars and specialists have not obtained extensive information concerning the historical background of this great fortress and only limited information is available in this regard, the only documents accessible to scholars and researchers are the reports of Islamic historians relating to the periods after the seventh to ninth centuries AD, and their reports can be used as a scholarly source.

Scholars have different theories and views regarding the historical background of the Bala Hissar of Gardez. Some believe that kings and sultans such as the Hephthalites, Nezak Shahs, Turk Shahs, Rutbil Shahs, and the Kabul Raiyan used this fortress, and that it was either constructed or renovated during their respective periods. Historians also consider Gardez to have been a center of Shaivism, because an ivory statue of Ganesha (Ganesa) was discovered from one of the foundations of this historic fortress (Faizi, p. 1).

The Bala Hissar of Gardez is situated in a position that, from a military and fortification perspective, enables it to protect and monitor its surroundings. This historic fortress was built on the slope of a hill, and the surrounding hills could have been used as observation and guard posts. According to historical accounts, this fortress, known as the Bala Hissar of Gardez, may at times have served as the headquarters of commanders of the Indo-Greek kings and at other times during the period of the Lesser Kushans (Kidara Shahs) and the Kushano-Hephthalites (Kabul Shahs). This issue requires further research, because until the area surrounding and the interior of the Bala Hissar are excavated, it is not possible to make a definitive judgment about it.

According to another account, before the Arab conquest of Kabul, this historic fortress was constructed and used during the period of the Hephthalites (Ephtaeit), following the end of

the Kidarite and Sasanian governments, particularly during the reign of Bahram IV of the Sasanians or in the era of Peroz (Piro). At a time when the Silk Road reached Peshawar through the major routes from other parts of Gandhara, Gardez enjoyed particular prosperity and was regarded as an important political and administrative center.

As a result of the Arab attacks on the lands of Afghanistan, particularly the campaigns of Abd al-Rahman ibn Samura and Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Ash'ath, the commanders-in-chief of the Islamic conquests in Afghanistan, as well as Ya'qub ibn al-Layth al-Saffar and his brother Amr ibn al-Layth, who entered the Logar and Gardez region from the north, the temple of Sjawand in Logar was burned. During this period, the last Brahman-Shahi dynasty fled to the Bala Hissar of Gardez, where they resisted and fought against the Arabs, but eventually they were defeated.

According to another account, Zamar and his sister Zaka, who had converted to the holy religion of Islam before the conquest of the Bala Hissar of Gardez, resisted the remnants of the Kushano-Hephthalites (Kabul Shahs), and eventually the Bala Hissar itself was conquered by Zaka.

During the Ghaznavid period, the Bala Hissar of Gardez served as a strong military fortress for local amirs and was also used as a prison. During the Ghaznavid period, because it was located near the border between Ghazni and India, it was renovated and transformed into a strong fortification. After the Ghaznavid period and until the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, this historic fortress continued to be used by local rulers. The Bala Hissar of Gardez, like the Bala Hissar of Kabul and other Bala Hissars, was also used as a prison and in this respect can be compared with the cities of Gharghara and Zuhak.

During the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, the people of Paktia began a rebellion against the government under the leadership of Babrak Khan Zadran. Amir Abdur Rahman sent his eldest son, Habibullah Khan, to suppress them. At that time, the number of government combatants was approximately 1,300, consisting of Shinwari, Laghmani, Kunar, and some people from the areas of Nangarhar and elsewhere, and they operated under the command of General Muhammad Nadir Khan. After attacking the fortress, they liberated the Bala Hissar of Gardez from the rebels. In recognition of the distinguished services of Muhammad Nadir Khan, he was appointed commander of a 12,000-man division stationed at the Bala Hissar and was promoted to the title of Na'ib al-Saltana. For this reason, the Bala Hissar was reconstructed in a strong and fortified manner.

Later, during the reign of Muhammad Zahir Shah and up to the present, the Bala Hissar of Gardez has been used as a military base, and as a result of the civil wars, some parts of it have been destroyed and damaged.

The Bala Hissar of Gardez, like other Bala Hissars in Afghanistan, was constructed from stone, pakhsa earth, mud brick, and wood. Towers were constructed around this historic fortress, with diameters ranging between 10 and 12 meters. This historic fortress consisted of two sections: one belonging

to the rulers and the other comprising the residential quarters of prominent figures.

In the construction of this building, in addition to other materials, bricks measuring $40 \times 40 \times 10$ centimeters were used. These bricks were generally employed in porticoes and arches. These characteristics can also be observed in the fortresses and citadels of other regions of Afghanistan, and the method of tower construction may have been derived from Greek and Kushan-period techniques (Faizi, p. 3).

The walls of this structure were also constructed in a crenellated form with appropriate arrow slits, and the date of such architecture can be placed between the second and seventh centuries AD and was probably inherited from that period. In addition to towers, arms, and moats, the Bala Hissar of Gardez also had entrance routes. Its entrance gate was surrounded by water-filled moats that had been dug to prevent the entry of attackers; however, these moats were gradually destroyed over time.

This historic fortress had high walls, towers, main towers, arrow slits, fortified and defensive towers, and strong and solid projecting structures. In addition to strong main gates, it also had secondary gates. Architecturally, the structure resembles the Bala Hissar of the Kabul region and northern Afghanistan and was constructed at an elevated point (Faizi, p. 4).

Based on the research conducted, the Bala Hissar may have been constructed in two stages. The first stage consisted of buildings with circular towers, within which square walls were located, and there was probably an entrance route within the fortification, with several other towers positioned alongside one another. The walls were constructed from square bricks measuring 40×40 centimeters and raazi mud, which has a greenish color. This method of brickmaking and construction can be compared with Kafir Qala in the Jalrez district and Takht-e Shah. The same architectural art was employed in the Bala Hissar of Gardez, particularly in its lower levels.

The second stage consisted of the central building, in which, similar to the lower structures of the fortress, attention was given to increasing the height and vertical dimension, while the buildings differed in terms of the treatment of their architectural plans. Generally, the bricks became relatively narrower, and a comparatively thicker stone covering was used around them, which may represent later construction phases in this central fortification. The upper towers were positioned alongside one another at specified intervals, and the thick mud-brick walls of each tower connected them together.

Regarding the study of the pottery finds discovered among the architectural layers, on the ground and/or on the surface of the fortification, closed-mouth tigers, medium-glazed examples, and in some cases wide-mouthed V5 vessels have been observed, which were used as jars or water containers. These types of tigers represent the early phases of the Shiwaki sites and the upper levels of the Bala Hissar of Gardez and Jalrez.

The third level generally consists of monastic or religious structures, including central stupas, votive stupas, viharas, and

passage corridors, which certainly possessed particular grandeur and magnificence in their own time. Individual major structures show similarities with the architectural systems of Babur, Khord Kabul, and Tepe Maranjan (Osmani, 2016, p. 73).

In terms of planning systems, there are no fundamental differences between these structures and other Buddhist monasteries and religious complexes, Nagara sites, and Pitawe and Shotorak. The technique of constructing three-story or two-story Buddhist stupas is generally evident in these monasteries. Of particular interest is the existence of a type of circular stupa resembling small circular stupas, the precise identification of which requires systematic and organized excavation at a later stage.

The technique of constructing porticoes and the type of Agulet porticoes, prominently worked with stone facing, can occasionally be observed among the remains of this stupa. The arches made of interconnected bricks, without changes in size, with a semi-open 40×40 brick table, remind us of Kafir Qala in Dasht-e Archi, Imam Sahib, where Greek and Bactrian architectural techniques were employed during the Kushan period.

In the ancient sites of Khroar, along the same third terrace, several hills are also visible on the western side, most of which do not exceed ten meters in height at their highest point and six meters at their lowest point. The remains of stupas, monks' cells, and residential structures can also be observed. The architectural style and use of materials in these sites show broad similarities with the sites of Khord Kabul and Tangi Sayedan, and there is no doubt that, chronologically, they all belong to the same generation in the second division.

The use of straw-and-mud plaster, mud plaster, and artistic painting was one of the architectural characteristics of this site. Geometric lines and colorful decorative elements on the walls of the monasteries located at the ancient site of Khroar are noteworthy (Osmani, p. 74).

7. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study organized according to the research questions and sub-questions. The findings are based on the analysis of historical texts, archaeological reports, and scholarly works concerning the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez.

7.1 Historical Antiquity and Chronology

7.1.1 Bala Hissar of Ghazni

It is believed that the history of Ghazni dates back to 1500 BC, and Ptolemy, the general of Alexander the Great, referred to it in his later writings during the Hellenistic period. Subsequently, in the sixth century BC, Cyrus II, the Achaemenid king, conquered it, after which it was incorporated into the Persian Empire, which extended from present-day Iran to India. Before the arrival of Islam in the region, around the ninth century AD, Ghazni was also a center of Buddhism (UNAMA, 2013).

The Ghazni Citadel, also known as the Bala Hissar, dates back to the pre-Islamic period. Many historical experts associate its origins with the Kushan Empire in the early first century AD.

Significant growth of the city and citadel occurred during the rule of the Ghaznavids in the tenth and eleventh centuries AD, bringing a rich combination of Persian and Indian art and architecture to the fortress and transforming Ghazni into an important cultural center (Darya Expeditions, 2024).

The historic fortress of Ghazni, known as the "Old City" of Ghazni, is considered one of the country's cultural heritage sites. This historic fortress is more than one thousand years old. The fortress of Ghazni occupies an area of 80 hectares in the center of Ghazni city and was constructed on an elevated site. This cultural heritage site has 34 towers and four gates, and during a certain historical period, all the inhabitants of Ghazni lived within it. This historic structure was once the center of rule of the kings and empire of the Ghaznavid dynasty and was regarded as a cradle of Persian poetry and literature. Hundreds of poets, philosophers, and scholars lived in this ancient land, each conducting research and scholarly activities in their respective fields.

The historic Bala Hissar of Ghazni was constructed at the highest point of this historic fortress and, throughout history, was used for various purposes, primarily military purposes. Over time, this historic fortress and the Bala Hissar of Ghazni have lost much of their former grandeur and magnificence and have now become similar to ruins. A number of residents of Ghazni have criticized governments for their lack of attention to the preservation of this cultural and civilizational heritage and state that the Bala Hissar of Ghazni has now reached the worst condition in its historical period. According to them, if attention is not paid to the condition of this historic structure, nothing of it will remain in the near future (8 Sobh Ghazni, 2022).

Ghazni is home to a wide range of cultural and archaeological remains, including fragments of Buddhist statues and a Hindu shrine from the pre-Islamic period. Key historic structures include the Mausoleum of Abdul Razzak, the Tomb of Mahmud of Ghazni, the Bahram Shah Minarets, the Palace of Masud III, and the Ghazni Citadel. Not all stories concerning the past of the Ghazni Citadel are widely known. Beyond its grandeur and historical significance, the citadel contains lesser-known facts. Old stories state that the citadel was the location of numerous hidden passages leading to key parts of the city, which were used by ancient kings during emergencies or attacks (Darya Expeditions, 2024).

7.1.2 Bala Hissar of Gardez

The Bala Hissar of Gardez is also among the historical structures of Afghanistan, with its origins dating back to the pre-Islamic periods. In this archaeological site, a statue of Ganesha, the son of Shiva, was discovered from its slopes, indicating that Shaivism was dominant in this religious area. Before the emergence of Islam, the Bala Hissar of Gardez was considered one of the important and major centers of Shaivism. The ivory statue of Ganesha (Ganesa), discovered from the foundation of this Bala Hissar, is of particular beauty. Ganesha, the son of Shiva, occupies a special position in Shaivite iconography.

Historical sources and remains indicate that Gardez was a center of sculpture and industry during the Buddhist period. The city of Gardez has a Bala Hissar dating from the early centuries of the Christian era, during which Buddhism and Shaivism were dominant. A study of the appearance of the hill on which the Bala Hissar was established indicates that it may have previously been one of the Buddhist centers and was later transformed into a military and residential fortress according to the needs of the time.

This fortress was rectangular in plan and had a fortification in which a number of towers and connecting passages between the towers were constructed for the defense of the area. The Bala Hissar of Gardez is one of the cultural manifestations of this province and was constructed in a rectangular form on a hill measuring 350 meters in length and 40 meters in width.

In the periods following the Kushans, when Greco-Buddhist art was dominant in the land of Ariana, the Hephthalite kings, the Kabul Raiyans, and the Rutbil Shahs also ruled in this region. The existence of a strong fortress in this mountainous area indicates that a major authority ruled in the region, and the Bala Hissar, with its strong fortifications and adequate defensive facilities, served as a military base for the kings after the Kushans. This period dates from the second to the seventh centuries AD.

Despite the historical importance of the Bala Hissar of Gardez, extensive scientific and academic archaeological activities have not yet been conducted at the site to accurately reveal its history and archaeological characteristics. Furthermore, it was not located along the routes traveled by Chinese pilgrims and travelers, and therefore historical records concerning the characteristics of this region have not been obtained from them. However, later references to the area can be found in Islamic-period sources, although these are not sufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the region (Khalili, 2020, p. 1).

7.2 Construction Materials and Techniques

7.2.1 Bala Hissar of Ghazni

Another interesting fact about the foundation and structure of the Bala Hissar of Ghazni is that it is believed that the citadel was constructed using a mixture of clay soil and straw, an ancient method that was used because of its insulating properties. This method ensured that the citadel remained cool during the summers and warm during the cold Afghan winters (Darya Expeditions, 2024).

The materials used in the Bala Hissar of Ghazni can be listed as follows:

1. **Mud Brick and Fired Brick:** The majority of the walls and towers were constructed from mud brick, consisting of clay and straw. In important or vulnerable sections, fired brick was used to increase durability.
2. **Stone and Mortar:** Rubble stone was used in the foundations and ground-level walls to provide greater strength. The mortar consisted of earthen mortar and, in some cases, lime mortar for greater strength. In

some walls, strong wooden beams were also embedded to reinforce the structure against earthquakes.

3. **Plaster and Traditional Materials:** Plaster and sarooj, consisting of lime and ash, were used for interior covering and moisture protection, and they also played a role in decorative passages.
4. **Brick and Decorative Tilework:** In important sections such as entrances and stairways, fired bricks with geometric designs were used. Colored glazed tiles with floral and geometric motifs also formed part of the decorative elements.
5. **Wood:** Roof beams were made from locally available timber, such as poplar, and were covered with mud brick. High-quality wood, sometimes cedar, was also used for doors, windows, and terrace columns.

7.2.2 Bala Hissar of Gardez

The construction materials of this historic fortification consisted of stone, mud brick, and pakhsa earth, while its architectural style was more closely related to indigenous architecture combined with principles of Greek architecture. The existing remains of the Bala Hissar of Gardez demonstrate two historical architectural phases, which may have been associated with the fortification traditions of the northern Hindu Kush, where characteristics of indigenous architectural art and Greco-Roman principles were incorporated.

In this architectural method, the exterior of the towers was circular while their interiors were square-like and connected to the corridors of the fortification walls. The architectural structure of the central section of the fortification was generally constructed of stone and mud bricks measuring 40×40 centimeters and, in some cases, 40×50 centimeters, which can be observed in the portico or niche (Nicha) sections.

This Bala Hissar, which has a length of 155 meters, was developed in two sections: the upper section, which served as the residence of kings and rulers and their families, and the lower section, which consisted of residential areas for ordinary people together with soldiers and religious figures. This division has also been considered a characteristic influenced by Greek architecture.

The Bala Hissar of Gardez had rectangular and circular towers. The towers were more than ten meters high; however, as a result of natural events and erosion caused by snow and rain, their original height cannot be determined precisely. The first section consists of the remains of defensive towers constructed using stone, brick, and pakhsa, with the towers appearing to have been positioned parallel to one another.

In the middle sections, there are remains of buildings that are thought to have served as a command center or palace for military rulers, and they may be associated with the kings and rulers of the Rutbil Shahs and subsequently with the Rai or Hindu Shahs of Kabul. The towers were mostly 10 to 12

meters high and were gradually damaged over time as a result of weather conditions.

The second section consisted of residential areas or perhaps areas occupied by religious figures and tribal elites, and it contained semi-arched circular towers. This type of structure has also been observed in the northern part of the country and possesses particular characteristics that may have been inherited from Kushan-period towers as well as from the established principles of tower and fortification construction used from the second century BC to the seventh century AD.

7.3 Architectural Characteristics and Spatial Organization

7.3.1 Bala Hissar of Ghazni

The Ghazni citadel is undoubtedly considered one of the finest examples of military fortifications in the country from an architectural perspective, and the old city of Ghazni developed around the citadel. This city has three passages on its northern, western, and southwestern sides, known as Bahlul, Bazar, and Kang. The Bala Hissar is located in the center of the city and is now partially ruined. Along the walls, surveillance and watchtowers were constructed, numbering 36 towers in total. In the past, the old city had four gates, which are still identifiable, as well as a small green square used for keeping the royal horses, and a large congregational mosque that resembled pre-Islamic temples, located to the east of Shah Bahar Square.

The Bala Hissar of Ghazni had dark, narrow, and underground passages that were used during times of siege. The walls were constructed of pakhsa and mud brick, and in some places of fired brick. Its towers were semi-circular and separated from one another by short distances, with the distance between the towers estimated at 15–25 meters. The Bala Hissar also had a public passage constructed on the Kabul–Kandahar highway for surveillance purposes, which served as a guard post during the period of the Ghaznavid kings.

7.3.2 Bala Hissar of Gardez

The Bala Hissar of Gardez, like other Bala Hissars in Afghanistan, was constructed from stone, pakhsa earth, mud brick, and wood. Towers were constructed around this historic fortress, with diameters ranging between 10 and 12 meters. This historic fortress consisted of two sections: one belonging to the rulers and the other comprising the residential quarters of prominent figures.

Based on the research conducted, the Bala Hissar may have been constructed in two stages. The first stage consisted of buildings with circular towers, within which square walls were located, and there was probably an entrance route within the fortification, with several other towers positioned alongside one another. The second stage consisted of the central building, in which attention was given to increasing the height and vertical dimension.

This historic fortress had high walls, towers, main towers, arrow slits, fortified and defensive towers, and strong and solid projecting structures. In addition to strong main gates, it also had secondary gates. Architecturally, the structure resembles

the Bala Hissar of the Kabul region and northern Afghanistan and was constructed at an elevated point.

7.4 Artistic and Cultural Evidence

7.4.1 Bala Hissar of Ghazni

Because of its rich historical background, Ghazni was recognized in 2013 by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as the "Cultural Center of the Islamic World." In order to commemorate this important cultural heritage, it was planned that a large number of the historical monuments of the province would be reconstructed and restored. However, the previous government restored only 34 of the hundreds of historic monuments in Ghazni, leaving many historical sites in the province untouched. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni is one of the historical sites that has not received sufficient attention (8 Sobh Ghazni, 2022).

The Bala Hissar was not only a military structure but also a symbol of the power, art, and grandeur of the Ghaznavids. Its artistic characteristics include the following:

- **Plasterwork and Tilework:** In some sections of the inner palaces and corridors of the fortress, traces of delicate plasterwork with floral and geometric motifs have been found, showing considerable similarity to Samanid and Ghaznavid art.
- **Glazed Tiles:** According to archaeological findings, some sections of the Bala Hissar contained colored tiles during the Ghaznavid and Ghurid periods, featuring arabesque designs and Kufic or Thuluth inscriptions.
- **Defensive Architecture and Aesthetics:** The towers and gates were not only military in function but were also designed in a manner that gave the fortress a particular sense of balance and grandeur.

7.4.2 Bala Hissar of Gardez

Although the Bala Hissar of Gardez primarily served a military function, simple plasterwork and decorative use of brick in the façades of the walls can be observed in some sections. Finds discovered in its vicinity, such as coins, decorative pottery, and evidence of metalworking, indicate the advanced and prosperous civilization of the Gardez region in the past.

Furthermore, the existence of the ivory statue of Ganesha, discovered from the foundation of the Bala Hissar of Gardez, is of particular artistic and religious significance. From an iconographic perspective, this object is associated with Shaivism and provides evidence of the presence and influence of pre-Islamic religious and artistic traditions in the region.

8. Discussion

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez. This section discusses these findings in relation to the research questions

and existing scholarship, while also identifying the contributions of this comparative study.

8.1 Historical Antiquity and Chronological Development

The comparative analysis of historical antiquity reveals that both Bala Hissars have roots extending into the pre-Islamic period, but with notable differences in their chronological development and historical documentation.

The Bala Hissar of Ghazni, with origins potentially dating back to the Kushan Empire in the early first century AD, experienced its most significant development during the Ghaznavid period in the tenth and eleventh centuries AD. This period transformed Ghazni into an important political, military, and cultural center, and the Bala Hissar served as the seat of power for the Ghaznavid rulers. The historical documentation for Ghazni is considerably richer, owing to its prominence in Islamic historiography and its recognition as a major cultural center along the Silk Road.

In contrast, the Bala Hissar of Gardez, while also possessing pre-Islamic origins dating to the Kushan and Hephthalite periods, lacks the same level of historical documentation. This is largely because Gardez was not located along the routes traveled by Chinese pilgrims and travelers, and extensive archaeological excavations have not been conducted at the site. The limited historical records available are primarily from Islamic-period sources, which provide only partial information about the region's earlier history.

This finding aligns with the observations of Khalili (2020), who noted that despite the historical importance of the Bala Hissar of Gardez, extensive scientific and academic archaeological activities have not yet been conducted at the site. The limited archaeological excavations and scientific investigations at Gardez make it difficult to establish its exact chronology and different phases of construction with certainty.

8.2 Construction Materials and Architectural Techniques

Both Bala Hissars demonstrate the extensive use of local materials such as mud brick, stone, earth, and wood, reflecting the adaptation of construction techniques to locally available resources. This is consistent with the broader pattern of vernacular architecture in Afghanistan (Hotak, 2016).

However, significant differences can be observed in their architectural organization and spatial planning. The Bala Hissar of Gardez contains rectangular and circular towers, defensive walls, residential areas, and other architectural elements that may represent different phases of construction and reconstruction. The presence of two distinct sections—an upper section for rulers and a lower section for ordinary people and soldiers—suggests a sophisticated spatial organization that may have been influenced by Greek architectural principles, as noted by Osmani (2016).

The Bala Hissar of Ghazni, on the other hand, developed in close association with the historic city of Ghazni and reflects the architectural and defensive traditions of different historical periods, particularly the Ghaznavid era. The semi-circular towers, four gates, and underground passages demonstrate

advanced defensive planning. The use of fired brick in important or vulnerable sections and the incorporation of decorative tilework indicate a higher level of architectural sophistication and aesthetic consideration.

8.3 Artistic and Cultural Significance

From an artistic and cultural perspective, both sites provide evidence of the interaction and development of different cultural traditions in Afghanistan. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni reflects the cultural and artistic achievements of the Ghaznavid period, with plasterwork, glazed tiles, and architectural elements showing considerable similarity to Samanid and Ghaznavid art. This is consistent with the historical significance of Ghazni as a cradle of Persian poetry and literature during the Ghaznavid period.

The Bala Hissar of Gardez provides evidence of pre-Islamic religious and artistic traditions, particularly Shaivism and Buddhist cultural traditions. The ivory statue of Ganesha, discovered from the foundation of the Bala Hissar, is of particular artistic and religious significance. As Khalili (2020) noted, this discovery indicates that Gardez was a center of Shaivism and that the Bala Hissar may have previously been one of the Buddhist centers later transformed into a military fortress.

These findings demonstrate the cultural diversity and religious pluralism that characterized Afghanistan's historical development, with different regions experiencing distinct cultural influences and traditions.

8.4 Defensive Function and Strategic Importance

Both Bala Hissars served primarily defensive and military functions, reflecting their strategic importance in different historical periods. The elevated positions, fortified walls, towers, and use of locally available construction materials reflect the defensive architectural traditions that developed in Afghanistan over different historical periods.

The Bala Hissar of Ghazni's strategic importance was particularly evident during the Ghaznavid period, when it served as the center of political and military administration. The 36 towers, four gates, and underground passages demonstrate sophisticated defensive planning. The British capture of the citadel in 1839 through its wooden gates, as noted by Azimi (2011), highlights both the strength of the fortification and its vulnerabilities.

The Bala Hissar of Gardez's strategic importance is evident from its location on the slope of a hill, with surrounding hills serving as observation and guard posts. Its use during different historical periods, from the Indo-Greek kings to the Ghaznavid period and up to the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, demonstrates its enduring strategic value.

8.5 Preservation and Conservation

Both Bala Hissars face significant preservation challenges. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni has lost much of its former grandeur and is now in a state of deterioration, with local residents expressing concern about the lack of government attention to its preservation (8 Sobh Ghazni, 2022). The Bala

Hissar of Gardez has also suffered damage as a result of civil wars and neglect.

These preservation challenges highlight the broader issue of cultural heritage management in Afghanistan. Despite the historical and cultural significance of these monuments, limited resources, conflict, and neglect have resulted in the deterioration of many archaeological sites. Urgent attention is needed to document, preserve, and protect these valuable components of Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

8.6 Original Contribution of This Study

This study makes several original contributions to the scholarship on Afghan historical architecture:

- It provides a systematic comparative analysis of two significant Bala Hissars, which has not been previously conducted.
- It synthesizes available historical and archaeological evidence from diverse sources to provide a comprehensive overview of both structures.
- It identifies gaps in the existing literature, particularly the lack of systematic archaeological excavation at the Bala Hissar of Gardez.
- It highlights the need for further research and preservation efforts at both sites.

9. Comparison of Bala Hissar of Ghazni and Bala Hissar of Gardez

The Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez are among the important historical buildings and fortifications of Afghanistan. Both have played significant roles in the historical, political, military, and cultural development of their respective regions. Examining and comparing these two Bala Hissars in terms of historical antiquity, use and construction materials, architectural characteristics, and artistic value can clarify the similarities and differences between these two historical monuments.

9.1 Comparison in Terms of Historical Antiquity

By comparing the background of the two structures, it can be stated that both Bala Hissars have pre-Islamic origins and have had different functions during various historical periods. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni was situated within the historical context of the city of Ghazni and, during different periods, particularly during the Ghaznavid period, became an important political, cultural, and military center. In contrast, the Bala Hissar of Gardez also has an ancient history, and the available evidence indicates its association with the Kushan, Hephthalite, and other pre-Islamic periods. However, regarding the exact date of the beginning of its construction and the stages of its development, the available information about the Bala Hissar of Gardez is more limited than that concerning Ghazni because of the limited archaeological excavations conducted there.

9.2 Comparison in Terms of Function and Construction Materials

Both Bala Hissars possessed strategic locations and defensive structures and used indigenous construction materials such as mud brick, stone, earth, and wood. However, differences can be observed in their spatial organization and architectural elements.

The Bala Hissar of Ghazni was more closely associated with the historic city of Ghazni and was used as a center of political and military power. Its construction reportedly employed mud brick, fired brick, stone, mortar, plaster, sarooj, brick, tile, and wood. In contrast, the Bala Hissar of Gardez consisted of two sections and contained rectangular and circular towers, defensive walls, porticoes, and residential spaces. Its principal materials were stone, mud brick, and pakhsa earth.

From the perspective of defensive architecture, both structures had towers and strong fortification walls. However, the forms of the towers at the Bala Hissar of Gardez were more diverse, with rectangular and circular towers found in different sections. This characteristic may indicate different phases of construction and reconstruction throughout the historical periods.

9.3 Comparison in Terms of Artistic Value

The historical and archaeological remains associated with Ghazni reflect the cultural and artistic achievements of the Ghaznavid period, with delicate plasterwork, glazed tiles, and architectural elements demonstrating considerable artistic sophistication. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni was not only a military structure but also a symbol of the power, art, and grandeur of the Ghaznavids.

The Bala Hissar of Gardez, while primarily serving a military function, provides evidence of pre-Islamic religious and artistic traditions, particularly Shaivism and Buddhist cultural traditions. The ivory statue of Ganesha discovered from its foundation is of particular artistic and religious significance, demonstrating the influence of pre-Islamic traditions in the region.

10. Conclusion

The comparative study of the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez demonstrates that both monuments represent important components of Afghanistan's historical, architectural, military, and cultural heritage. Although the two fortifications are located in different geographical and historical contexts, both were established in strategically important locations and served primarily defensive and military functions. Their elevated positions, fortified walls, towers, and use of locally available construction materials reflect the defensive architectural traditions that developed in Afghanistan over different historical periods.

From the perspective of historical antiquity, both Bala Hissars have roots extending into the pre-Islamic period. However, the historical development of the Bala Hissar of Ghazni is better documented, particularly because of Ghazni's major political, cultural, and military role during the Ghaznavid period. The Bala Hissar of Gardez also possesses a long and significant history, with evidence linking the site to the Kushan, Hephthalite, and other pre-Islamic periods, followed by

continued use during the Islamic periods. Nevertheless, the limited archaeological excavations and scientific investigations at Gardez make it difficult to establish its exact chronology and different phases of construction with certainty.

In terms of construction materials and architectural features, both monuments demonstrate the extensive use of local materials such as mud brick, stone, earth, and wood. However, differences can be observed in their architectural organization. The Bala Hissar of Gardez contains rectangular and circular towers, defensive walls, residential areas, and other architectural elements that may represent different phases of construction and reconstruction. The Bala Hissar of Ghazni, on the other hand, developed in close association with the historic city of Ghazni and reflects the architectural and defensive traditions of different historical periods, particularly the Ghaznavid era.

From an artistic and cultural perspective, both sites provide evidence of the interaction and development of different cultural traditions in Afghanistan. The historical and archaeological remains associated with Ghazni reflect the cultural and artistic achievements of the Ghaznavid period, while the ivory statue of Ganesha and other archaeological evidence associated with Gardez demonstrate the influence of pre-Islamic religious and artistic traditions, particularly Shaivism and Buddhist cultural traditions.

Overall, the comparison indicates that the Bala Hissar of Ghazni and the Bala Hissar of Gardez are not merely military fortifications; rather, they are historical documents that reflect the political changes, cultural interactions, architectural developments, and social transformations that occurred in Afghanistan over centuries. Despite their similarities in defensive function and use of local materials, their differences in historical development, architectural organization, and artistic evidence demonstrate the diverse nature of Afghanistan's architectural heritage. Therefore, systematic archaeological excavation, accurate documentation, conservation, and further scientific research are essential for both monuments, particularly the Bala Hissar of Gardez, in order to clarify its chronology and architectural development and to ensure the preservation of these valuable components of Afghanistan's cultural heritage for future generations.

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