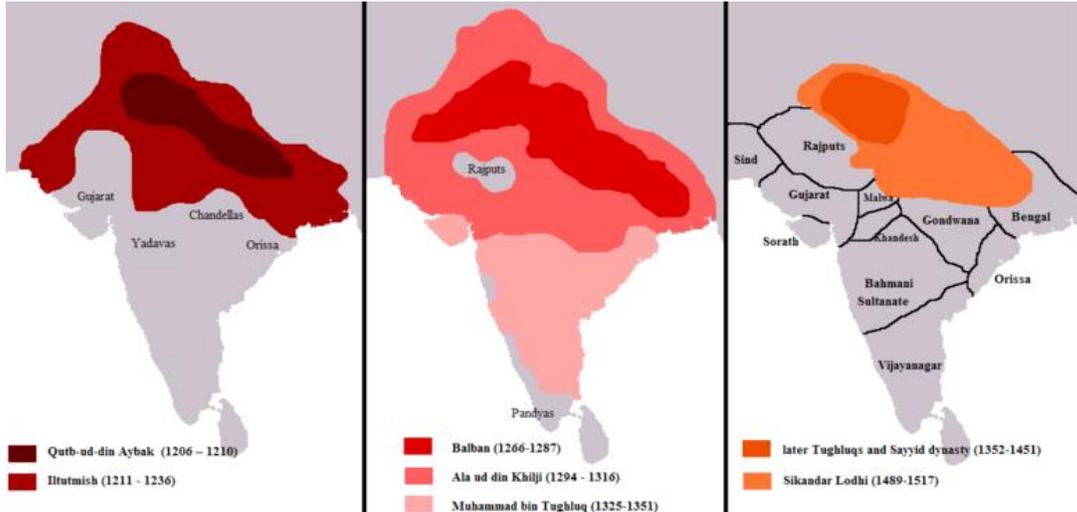


Art and Architecture of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1572)



Maps showing the extent of the various rulers of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1572)

Terms of Use: The image above is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/) license. It is attributed to Wikipedia user [Javierfv1212](#). The original version can be found [here](#).

Arab traders had been visiting the Indian subcontinent for centuries, but it was not until the late 12th century, when Muhammad of Ghor (1162–1206) conquered most of northern India, that large numbers of Muslims entered India for the first time. After Muhammad of Ghor's death, one of his generals, Qutb al-Din Aibak (1150–1210), declared his independence and proclaimed himself sultan. His son Iltutmish (r. 1211–1236) was later confirmed as the sultan of Delhi by the caliph in Baghdad. For roughly the next 300 years, the Turkish rulers of the Delhi Sultanate controlled the northern portion of India under five different dynasties. The extent of land controlled by each of these dynasties is shown in the maps above.



Left: Colonnades in the central courtyard of the Quwwat ul-Islam Mosque, Qutb Complex, Delhi, 1192–1196

Right: The sandstone gate of the Quwwat ul-Islam Mosque, Qutb Complex, Delhi, 1198

Terms of Use: Left image: This image is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License](#). It is attributed to Flickr user [Gary Ho](#). The original version can be found [here](#). Right image: This image is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License](#). It is attributed to Flickr user [stevekc](#). The original version can be found [here](#).

One of Qutb al-Din Aibak's first acts as sultan was the commissioning of a mosque—Quwwat ul-Islam, or “*Might of Islam*”—in the center of the conquered Hindu stronghold of the citadel of Delhi. The mosque's open courtyard, colonnades, and qibla wall were built from the pillars and ceilings of 27 Hindu temples. These repurposed pillars had to be stacked on top of each other to achieve the height necessary for the mosque's colonnades, which can be seen in the above photo on the left. Qutb al-Din Aibak later added an enormous sandstone screen in front of the mosque, which you can see above on the right. Although based on Iranian prototypes, the mosque was built by local craftsmen who used corbelled arches, a technique commonly used in Indian temples—but not in earlier Islamic architecture—to create the structure. Corbelled arches are constructed by laying stone blocks on top of each other, with each block protruding slightly beyond the blocks below until they meet at the top of the archway. The façade was decorated with Arabic calligraphy and vegetal motifs. The iron pillar that you see in front of the center of the central arch in the image on the right was taken from a temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Vishnu and erected as a trophy. To the south of the mosque, Qutb al-Din Aibak began to construct a massive minaret (72.5 meters/238 feet) that was later completed by his son and successor, Iltutmish. The minaret is decorated with wide bands of calligraphy intermingled with floral and vegetal motifs. Iltutmish also later constructed a plain square stone tomb with a corbelled dome. His commissioning of this tomb initiated the tradition of constructing royal tombs, which many successive Muslim rulers in India would follow.



Left: A ceremonial gateway leading to the Quwwat ul-Islam Mosque, Qutb Complex, Delhi, 1311

Right: Alai Minar, Qutb Complex, early 14th century

Terms of Use: Left image: This image is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#), [2.5 Generic](#), [2.0 Generic](#) and [1.0 Generic](#) license. It is attributed to Wikimedia user [Poco a poco](#). The original version can be found [here](#). Right image: This image is licensed under the [Creative](#)



[Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Germany](#) license. It is attributed to Wikipedia user [Kavaiyan](#). The original version can be found [here](#).

The Qutb Complex, as the original mosque and its successive additions are collectively known, was further expanded by the ambitious Sultan Ala al-Din Khalji (r. 1296–1313), who added a massive ceremonial gateway made of a true arch and dome and decorated with blocks of red sandstone and white granite. It was completed in 1311 and is pictured above on the left. Ala al-Din Khalji also began the construction of a second massive minaret: the Alai Minar. Although it was intended to be twice the size of the minaret built by Qutb al-Din Aibak and Iltutmish, it was never completed. The remains of its massive foundation can be seen above on the right.

By the time the Tughlaq dynasty controlled the Delhi Sultanate in the 14th century, an indigenous Islamic culture was emerging in northern India. The Tughlaqs built a massive fortified city six kilometers (3.5 miles) north of the Qutb Complex. Like the practice of building royal tombs began by Iltutmish, successive Islamic rulers would follow Tughlaq practice and build a new capital after they came to power. The remains of this city and the capital cities constructed by successive Tughlaq rulers are located around the outskirts of the modern city of Delhi. Muhammad ibn Tughlaq's failed attempt to conquer southern India in the early 14th century also led to the establishment of independent Islamic rulers in the Deccan, whose courts remained important centers of Islamic cultures for several centuries.¹



*Left: The two upper stories of the Qutb minaret constructed by Firuz Shah Tughlaq, 1368
Right: The tomb of Firuz Shah Tughlaq in Hauz Khas, Delhi, 1351–1388*

Terms of Use: Left image: This image is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License](#). It is attributed to [Varun Shiv Kapur](#). The original version can be found [here](#). Right image: This image is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](#) license. It is attributed to Wikipedia user [Nvuchar](#). The original version can be found [here](#).

At a time when the Tughlaq dynasty's power extended little beyond the area surrounding the city of Delhi, Firuz Shah Tughlaq (r. 1351–1388) initiated several large

¹ The Deccan is a large plateau making up most of southern India.



building projects, including hunting pavilions, palaces, mosques, canals, wells, and sluices. One of his most interesting projects was the transport of two large columns originally erected by Emperor Ashoka (c. 304–232 B.C.E.), a powerful ancient Buddhist ruler, to Delhi. One of these pillars, known as the golden minaret, was erected beside the mosque that Firuz Shah Tughlaq built. He also added two stories to the top of the minaret originally constructed by Qutb al-Din Aibak and Iltutmish after it was damaged by lightning, which you can see above on the left. Firuz Shah Tughlaq also constructed a madrasa and tomb complex, which today is known as Hauz Khas. The main school overlooked a large water tank, and there were small kiosks scattered throughout the grounds where religious discussions could be held. His domed tomb, which you can see above on the right, was made of limestone, brick, and plaster, and its terrace was surrounded by a railing of which today only some of the columns and banisters remain. Railings were often used in Indian Buddhist structures but are unusual in Islamic contexts and may, like the reuse of Emperor Ashoka's columns, have been meant to recall the power and glory of ancient India.



Left: Lodi royal tomb, Lodi Gardens, Delhi, 14th century

Terms of Use: Left image: This image is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License](#). It is attributed to [Dave Kleinschmidt](#). The original version can be found [here](#).

In 1398, Timur (Tamerlane) sacked Delhi, and it was not until the mid-15th century that the Lodis established themselves as the last rulers of the Delhi Sultanate. Rather than build new cities, mosques, or madrasas, as previous Islamic rulers had done, the Lodis built many tomb structures around the modern city of New Delhi. Previously, only kings and saints were buried in large mausoleums, but under the Lodi rulers, large tombs were also constructed by the nobility. This has to do with the Lodi conception of



kingship. Originally a tribal group with origins in Afghanistan, the Lodis considered a king to be first among equals, and tomb building was not considered solely as a royal prerogative. The tombs of the Lodi sultans were octagonal, such as the one you see above on the left, while the tombs of the Lodi nobles were square. The large necropolis that contains royal and noble tombs today is known as the Lodi Gardens. The necropolis is entered by the imposing domed gate that you see above on the right. Lodi rule also saw the introduction of the Iranian double dome, where one dome was constructed on top of the other with a space left in between. The Lodi dynasty and the Delhi Sultanate came to an end in 1526 when Mughal founder Babur defeated the last Lodi ruler.



Koran written in Bihari script, c. 1400–1425

Terms of Use: The image above is available in the public domain.

The early rulers of the Delhi Sultanate are often viewed as iconoclasts, pillaging and destroying Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples.² Their actions should be understood against Islamic prohibitions of anthropomorphic representation and the original shock that probably accompanied their first encounters with sumptuously decorated Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples and their deities. Although almost no metalwork has survived that was produced under the patronage of the Delhi Sultanate, a distinct tradition of book production can be traced to the Delhi beginning in the 15th century.³ At this time, a new style of calligraphy used in Korans called the Bihari script emerged, with distinctive wedge-shaped letters, thick bowl-like shapes for endings, and ample

² Jainism is an Indian religion that emphasizes a path of nonviolence toward all living beings and the necessity of self-effort to move the soul toward divine consciousness and liberation.
³ Earlier manuscripts were probably destroyed when Timur sacked Delhi in 1398.



space left between words. An example of a Koran written in the Bihari script can be seen above.

Royal painting workshops appear to have flourished under more liberal rulers but were disbanded when conservatives came to the throne. Not many examples of illustrated manuscripts created under the Delhi Sultanates have survived, but an interesting copy of the *Shahnama*, or *The Book of Kings*, created in the mid-15th century under Lodi rule, bares a close relationship to contemporary Jain paintings. Many of the women in the illustrations are depicted with full breasts and small waists, with the lower folds of their garments arranged in stiff triangles. Such imagery contrasts sharply to Persian illustrations of the *Shahnama*. Other more common features that appear in manuscripts during the 15th century that are based on Indian traditions include groups of people in serried rows and identical poses, narrow bands of decoration that run across the width of the composition, and bright and unusual colors that replace the modulated colors typically found in earlier Timurid painting.

