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Decline and Downfall of the Delhi Sultanate

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Decline and Downfall of the Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate did not fall in one day. Timur broke it in 1398. The Sayyids and Lodis ruled a shrinking realm. Babur ended it at Panipat in 1526.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **1398** Timur sacks Delhi

02 **1414** Khizr Khan founds the Sayyids

03 **1451** Bahlul Lodi takes the throne

04 **1526** Babur wins at Panipat

After Timur

1 Timur Sacks Delhi

1.1 Why did Timur come to Delhi?

Timur came for loot. In the winter of **1398-9** he crossed into India and beat the army of Sultan Mahmud Shah. One historian notes that he had no real plan to rule. If he ever thought of lasting conquest, he gave it up before he reached Delhi.


فکنده همه دشت خرطوم فیل
همه دشت باشیده چوگان و گوی
فتاده تن کشتگان چند میل
گیاها بمغز سر آلوده گشت
ز خرطوم فیل و تن جنگجوی
ز کشته زمین سر بسر توده گشت
مبارزان ممالک هندوستان از بیم جان حرکة المذبوحی میکردند و بقدر طاقت و توان



Timur defeats the Sultan of Delhi. Imperial Library of Akbar, c. 1595-1600. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

1.2 How long was the road to Delhi?

Timur left Kabul on **15 August** and crossed the Indus on 24 September. Then came weeks of marching, raids and massacres before he stood near Delhi. The journey was long, but the prize was close. Delhi was rich, and its rulers were fighting each other.

1.3 How did the battle at Delhi go?

The Indian army had about **10,000 horse, 40,000 foot and 120 elephants**. Timur's men dug a ditch and set up thatch screens. They hobbled buffaloes together in front to break the elephant charge. The Indian army broke, and the elephants were driven off.

1.4 What happened to the city?

Timur's troops entered Delhi and sacked it for several days. Artisans were sent to the provinces of his empire.

- The stonemasons went to **Samarkand** to build his great Friday mosque.
- A later writer said the city was left utterly ruined.
- He added that for two months not a bird moved a wing.

1.5 What happened to the prisoners?

Before the battle Timur held about **100,000** adult male captives in his camp. When the Delhi army attacked his rear, the captives could not hide their joy.

- Timur feared them and had them all **put to death**.

The sack that followed was not an accident of war. It was part of his method.

> 10. **Think it through:** Why did Timur not stay and rule? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Timur invaded India aiming to rule Delhi permanently. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: Many of Delhi's stonemasons were taken to Samarkand. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: archive.org; worldhistory.org

2 The Sayyids and Palam

2.1 What was left after Timur?

The Tughlaq kingdom broke apart. **Gujarat** owned no master. **Malwa**'s governor ruled like a king without the title. Jaunpur and Bengal were already apart. A writer of the time summed it up in one line: the kingdom was completely dissolved.

2.2 Who started the Sayyid dynasty?

Khizr Khan governed the Punjab and Upper Sind as Timur's viceroy. On **28 May 1414** he entered Delhi as its ruler. That began the Sayyid dynasty.

2.3 How small did the Sultan's rule become?

A saying of the time put it this way: the rule of the Lord of the World extends from Delhi to **Palam**. Palam lay only about nine miles south-west of the capital. By 1444 no point on the frontier was more than forty miles from Delhi.

2.4 Why did governors break away?

A weak centre invited rebellion. The eunuch minister Malik Sarvar had placed a new sultan on the throne in 1393. Then he threw off his allegiance and set himself up at **Jaunpur**.

- Governors elsewhere saw that Delhi could not punish them.
- Each took what he could hold.
- The Sultan’s real power shrank to the capital’s neighbourhood.

That is why the Sayyids inherited so little.

11. **Think it through:** Why is the Palam saying so famous? See answer ↓

Quick check 3. True or false: Khizr Khan took Delhi as Timur's viceroy in the Punjab turned ruler. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 4. True or false: Gujarat and Malwa stayed loyal to Delhi after Timur left. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 Alam Shah and Bahlul Lodi

3.1 Who was Alam Shah?

Alam Shah was the last Sayyid ruler. He inherited a kingdom made of Delhi and a few nearby villages. The chronicle calls him even more feeble and vacillating than his father.

3.2 What happened to the Tughlaq line?

After Mahmud Shah died, the nobles chose the strongest of their number, Daulat Khan Lodi. He ruled for a short time. Khizr Khan then took Delhi, and Daulat Khan was imprisoned in Hissar. So one dynasty ended and another began without a great battle.

3.3 How did the Sayyids give way?

Bahlul Lodi was waiting for his chance. Alam Shah gave up the throne to him. Bahlul ascended the throne of Delhi in **1451**.

3.4 What had Bahlul done before that?

Bahlul raised large numbers of Afghans, especially from his own tribe, for his army. He once marched to Delhi and besieged it. He failed to take it, but he learned how weak the city was. When the time came, he did not need a siege.

3.5 Who were the Lodis?

The Lodis were Afghans, though by origin Turks long settled in Afghanistan.

12. **Think it through:** Was Alam Shah beaten in battle? See answer ↓

Quick check 5. True or false: Bahlul Lodi took the throne of Delhi in 1451. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Panipat

4 Babur Wins at Panipat

4.0 Why was Ibrahim Lodi weak?

Ibrahim was raised to the throne at Agra on **21 November 1517**. A turbulent faction wanted the kingdom divided. It set up his kinsman **Jalal Khan** as ruler of Jaunpur. The noble Khanjahan Lohani opposed splitting the realm.

Jalal Khan later fled to Kalpi and had prayers read in his own name. The nobles stayed restless.

Ghazi Khan, son of the Lahore governor Daulat Khan Lodi, saw this discontent at Delhi. He warned his father to expect no mercy.

- From then on **Daulat Khan** acted almost as an independent ruler.
- He began his dealings with Babur. Those dealings led to Ibrahim's fall.
- Daulat Khan himself died while Babur was still on the road.

Rebellion also raged in the east. Nasir Khan Lohani, governor of Ghazipur, joined a rebel who took the title Muhammad Shah. That rebel gathered an army of 100,000 horse. For months he defied the sultan.

4.1 What did Babur face at Panipat?

Babur's men estimated the enemy at **100,000**, with about **1,000 elephants**. Babur camped with the town of Panipat on one side. Carts and screens covered the others.



The Battle of Panipat, 20 April 1526, in a Baburnama manuscript of 1598. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

4.2 What was special about his camp?

Babur had the carts joined with ropes of raw hide, in **Ottoman** fashion. Matchlockmen stood behind screens between the carts. Gaps were left for horsemen to sally out.

4.3 How was the battle won?

Babur's flanking parties wheeled round to the enemy rear and rained arrows. The gunner Ustad Ali-quli fired from the centre. By noon the enemy was crushed. In his own words, the armed mass was laid on the earth in one half-day.

4.4 How many died?

Babur recorded that five or six thousand men fell close to Ibrahim alone. His own count of the dead across the field was 15 to 16,000.

Later, people in Agra told him the true figure might be 40 or 50,000. Numbers in old chronicles vary, so exams rarely ask for them.

Captured mahauts brought herd after herd of elephants to Babur.

4.5 What happened to Ibrahim?

Ibrahim Lodi died on the field. Babur's men found his body among the dead. He was the sultan slain in battle, and the Lodi line ended with him.

13. **Think it through:** Did cannon fire panic the elephants? See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: Babur's memoir mentions carts joined in Ottoman fashion. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 7. True or false: Ibrahim Lodi survived Panipat and fled to Agra. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: archive.org; en.banglapedia.org

5 Why Panipat Ended It

5.1 Which date should you use?

Babur's memoir gives Friday the 8th of Rajab. Beveridge converts it to **20 April 1526**. The Cambridge History says 18 April. Many books say 21 April. In an exam, choose the year 1526 and stay with April.

5.2 Why is Panipat treated as the end?

Regional kingdoms had already taken most of the land. But a Sultan still sat in Delhi. At Panipat that Sultan fell and Babur took his throne. This is a clean, dateable end.

> 14. **Think it through:** Which dynasties ruled Delhi in order after the Tughlaqs? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 8.** True or false: Panipat ended the line of Delhi Sultans with the Lodis. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Angle

6 Exam Traps to Avoid

6.1 What do the exam papers test?

Asked before

PYQ 1 · UPSC CSP 2015, Q41

Consider the following: The arrival of Babur into India led to the

(a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 3 only
(c) 1 and 3 only
(d) 1, 2 and 3

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6.2 Which points repeat?

- Timur: sack of Delhi in **1398**.
- Khizr Khan: first Sayyid, 1414.
- Palam: the shrunken kingdom of the Sayyids.
- Bahlul Lodi: first Lodi, 1451.
- Panipat: **1526**, Babur beat Ibrahim Lodi.

- Ibrahim died on the field.

15. **Think it through:** How do you remember the order? See answer ↓

Quick check 9. True or false: Babur's arrival introduced gunpowder to India. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Exam Practice

Remember this

- **Timur:** Sacked Delhi, 1398; plunder not rule
- **Khizr Khan:** First Sayyid, 1414
- **Palam:** Saying about the shrunken realm
- **Bahlul Lodi:** First Lodi, 1451
- **Panipat:** 1526; Ibrahim died on the field

Explain it back: Why is Panipat treated as the end of the Sultanate, even though territory was lost earlier?

Practice MCQs

1. The last ruler of the Sayyid dynasty, Alauddin Alam Shah, was defeated and displaced by the founder of which succeeding dynasty?

A. The Sur dynasty (Sher Shah Suri)

B. The Lodi dynasty (Bahlul Lodi)

C. The Mughal dynasty (Babur)

D. The Khilji dynasty

See answer ↓

2. The Delhi Sultanate formally ended in 1526 CE at the First Battle of Panipat, where Babur defeated which ruler?

A. Sikandar Lodi

B. Bahlul Lodi

C. Daulat Khan Lodi

D. Ibrahim Lodi

See answer ↓

3. Ibrahim Lodi holds a distinct place among Delhi Sultans because, unlike any of his predecessors, he:

A. Never faced a succession dispute

B. Died on the battlefield

C. Was a woman

D. Ruled for over 50 years

See answer ↓

4. At the Battle of Delhi, on 17 December 1398, how did Timur's forces neutralise Sultan Mahmud Shah Tughlaq's war elephants?

A. Using fire and camels to panic them, after digging protective trenches around his own cavalry

B. By capturing and reusing the elephants against the Sultan

C. Through a direct cavalry charge, without special tactics

D. By negotiating a surrender before any fighting began

See answer ↓

5. What did Timur's forces do to Delhi's skilled artisans and craftsmen, after sacking the city?

A. Left them entirely unharmed, to rebuild the city

B. Recruited them as officers in his own army

C. Captured and enslaved them, taking many back to Samarkand

D. Exiled them permanently to the Deccan

See answer ↓

6. Why did Timur withdraw from Delhi soon after sacking it, rather than staying to rule India directly?

A. He judged that India could not realistically be governed from distant Samarkand

B. The Sultan's army regrouped and forced him out

C. A plague broke out among his own troops

D. He had no interest in India beyond a single raid, from the outset

See answer ↓

7. Timur's invasion left the Delhi Sultanate badly weakened, which regional governors used to declare independence.

Which two sultanates, covered elsewhere on this site, emerged this way within a decade?

A. The Bahmani Sultanate and the Vijayanagara Empire

B. The Malwa Sultanate and the Gujarat Sultanate

C. The Sayyid dynasty and the Lodi dynasty

D. The Mughal Empire and the Maratha Confederacy

See answer ↓

8. At the First Battle of Panipat in 1526, which factor most disrupted Ibrahim Lodi's much larger army?

A. Running out of supplies

B. A mutiny among his cavalry

C. Cannon fire panicking his war elephants

D. A sudden monsoon flood

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** Bahlul Lodi's displacement of the last Sayyid ruler marked the beginning of the Lodi dynasty -- the first (and only) Afghan dynasty to rule at Delhi before the Mughal conquest. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi at the First Battle of Panipat in 1526 CE; Ibrahim died on the battlefield, ending the Delhi Sultanate. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** Ibrahim Lodi is the only Delhi Sultan ever to die in battle, at the First Battle of Panipat in 1526 CE. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** Timur knew that cavalry horses feared elephants, so he protected his own cavalry with trenches first. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** Many were later put to work on Timur's own building projects in Samarkand. ↑ Q5
6. **A.** He took his plunder and captives, and returned toward Central Asia within weeks. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** Both were founded by former Delhi Sultanate governors, within a decade of Timur's 1398 invasion. ↑ Q7
8. **C.** Babur's guns fired on Lodi's line. The frightened elephants turned back and threw Lodi's own ranks into disorder. In the Baburnama, Ustad Ali Quli and Mustafa of Rum handled the guns. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** His object was plunder; he gave up any thought of lasting rule. ↑ 1
2. **True.** They helped build his great Friday mosque. ↑ 2
3. **True.** He entered Delhi in 1414 and founded the Sayyids. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Both acted as independent kingdoms. ↑ 4
5. **True.** Alam Shah resigned it to him. ↑ 5
6. **True.** He used raw-hide ropes between the carts. ↑ 6
7. **False.** His body was found among the dead. ↑ 7
8. **True.** Babur took the throne after Ibrahim fell. ↑ 8
9. **False.** Gunpowder was already known; Timurid rule was new. ↑ 9

10. **Think it through.** His aim was plunder. Delhi was far from Samarkand, and the city was already in ruins. A distant ruler could not hold it. So he took the loot and left. ↑ 10
11. **Think it through.** It turns a political fact into a joke. A ruler with a grand title governed a town and a few villages. ↑ 11
12. **Think it through.** The source says he resigned the throne to Bahlul. Some exam keys say he was defeated and displaced. Read the question wording carefully. ↑ 12
13. **Think it through.** Popular accounts say so. Babur's own text credits arrows for driving an elephant back. His editor thinks he may have had only two guns. So treat the story with care. ↑ 13
14. **Think it through.** The Sayyids, then the Lodis. After the Lodis came Babur and the Mughals. ↑ 14
15. **Think it through.** Timur, Sayyids, Lodis, Babur. Each name opens a chapter. ↑ 15

Previous year answers

1. **(b) 3 only** Gunpowder had already reached India before Babur, and the Delhi Sultanate had already introduced the true arch and dome. Only the establishment of Timurid rule was genuinely new with Babur's arrival.

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