In January 1772 the reigning Mughal emperor Shah Alam II entered Delhi with much pomp and splendor. In 1759 following his father’s death, Shah Alam had ascended the masnad (throne) as the new emperor but had stayed away from Delhi in a bid to garner support to counter the monopoly of the minister Ghaziuddin who effectively controlled the Mughal court under his father Alamgir II (r. 1754-1759). Yet, the desire to return to his ancestral home and reassert his supremacy from the dar-al-khilafat, the traditional seat of empire at Shahjahanabad, remained ever present. Following the Battle of Buxar 1764, Mughal geographical dominance had steadily diminished—its major territories were now the hands of the British East India Company. By the last quarter of the eighteenth century only the limits of the Mughal city of Shahjahanabad and the local environs of Delhi constituted the bulk of Shah Alam’s political as well as geographical dominion, evoking the popular saying, “From Delhi to Palam—the reign of Shah Alam.”

---


2 Shah Alam had fled Delhi following the occupation of the city by Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1756-57 and moved around Patna and Varanasi. According to Jadunath Sarkar Shah Alam II entered Delhi on 10 January 1772 but both Antoine Polier and William Francklin suggest 25th December 1771 as the date of his return to Delhi. See Jadunath Sarkar, *Fall of the Mughal Empire* (Calcutta: 1952), p. 555; A.L.H. Polier, *Shah Alam II and his court. A narrative of the transactions at the court of Delhy from the year 1771 to the present time*... Ed. Pratul C. Gupta (1989); William Francklin, *History of the reign of Shah-Aulum* (1798).

3 In 1764 after losing the battle of Buxar against the British East India Company Shah Alam had signed a treaty handing over the diwani of Bihar, Bengal, and Orissa to them, and moved to Allahabad where he was to remain for another seven years. Later, Shah Alam conceded other territories in the Doab to Maratha chiefs in exchange for a safe passage to Delhi.
Against the backdrop of Shah Alam’s return to Delhi, this essay looks at the pictorial modes of imagining Delhi and its environs from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, when the Mughal house re-established itself in the city. It studies the enmeshed nature of art, politics, and artistic agency manifested in the imagery of the Qila i-Mualla (the Exalted Fort) at Delhi within Indo-European imagination, proposing that the pictorial representation of Shahjahanabad and its environs was synonymous with the projection of later-Mughal sovereignty. The visual stronghold of fort imagery, that referenced the vocabulary of Mughal miniature painting as well as European topographical techniques of representation, offers a unique insight into the constitutive role of these conventions in the development of the Delhi school of painting under Shah Alam II and his successors. In this context, we look at the significance of works produced within a cross-cultural artistic climate, under patrons such as Jean-Bapiste Gentil (1726-1799) in Avadh and Antoine Louis Henri Polier (1741-1795) in Delhi in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Gentil’s commission of the Recueil des toutes sortes … (1774) and Polier’s own experience of the Mughal court at Delhi (ca. 1776) were, as we will see, significant for building a topographical vocabulary for Shah Alam’s imperial image through various modes of visualizing Shahjahanabad. In this context, an early painting of the Red Fort dated to 1750 by the Mughal court artist Nidha Mal (active 1735-75) is considered for its repercussions on later cartographic drawings commissioned by Gentil and Polier. Nidha Mal’s own migration from Delhi to Avadh is a significant subtext for this analysis, in the wake of successive attacks on Delhi by the Afghan ruler Ahmad Shah Abdali (reigned 1747-1773), and other rival political groups. As Delhi artists found reemployment in the provincial courts, they were also absorbed into the emerging information network of European surveys of Indian territories. The agency of these local artists in this process of topographical translation was paramount, as they were able to re-imagine Mughal kingship largely in terms of its architectural and geographical symbolism.

Mapping Delhi, Depicting Shahjahanabad

Delhi continued to enjoy the unique position of being an intellectual, spiritual, and cultural center of the Mughal Empire and this was reflected in its prominence as a regional stronghold as well as urban