

Abode of the gods

At first glance the book may seem like a coffee-table book because of its lavish photographs, but the Filliozats' text is valuable as it explores political, social and religious aspects of the Vijayanagar Empire through an [elaborate examination of its architecture](#). BY **VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED**

HAMPI, which lies in the north-eastern part of Karnataka, is one of the most significant historical sites of India. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation recognised it as a World Heritage Site in 1986, which ensured that its fame spread around the globe. The legions of tourists who visit this place, which was the former capital of the Vijayanagar (also spelt as Vijayanagara) Empire, are awestruck by the grandeur and majesty of the remnants of its many monuments. There is also a bucolic air to the site as the Tungabhadra river flows serenely by and the monuments themselves are surrounded by paddy fields and banana plantations, which add to the overall charm of Hampi. More than 450 years have passed since the Battle of Talikota (1565), which sounded the death knell for this city, but the lure of this magnificent site remains unabated. Visitors are often drawn back as there is simply so much to admire (there are more than 500 archaeological remains spread over an



**Hampi
Sacred India
Glorious India**

By Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat and Vasundhara Kavali-Filliozat
Photographs by Bernard Grismayer and Roshane Saidnattar

**5 Continents
Editions, Milan, 2021**

Pages: 219

Price: \$100/€80/£70

area of 25-30 square kilometres), and with each further visit, one more layer of the complicated history of the site is peeled back in the visitor's head.

Vijayanagar was founded sometime in the 1340s in the wake of the withdrawal of the Delhi Sultanate from its dominions in south India. A few decades before this, at the end of the 13th century, south India was parcelled out among different dynasties such as the Yadavas, the Kakatiyas, the Hoysalas and the Pandyas when invasions of north Indian rulers of the Delhi Sultanate belonging to the Khilji and the Tughluq dynasties radically altered the map of

peninsular India by extending the realm of the sultanate down to the deep south. In the 1330s, when Mohammed Tughluq withdrew to Delhi, abandoning his capital of Devagiri (or Daulatabad), two emerging polities filled the gap: The Bahmani Empire emerged north of the Krishna river with its capital in Kalaburagi, while Vijayanagar was founded to the south of the river by a cohort of brothers with its capital at Hampi.

This foundational cohort of brothers formed the early leadership of the nascent state, and their descendants are considered to belong to the first dynasty, known as the Sangamas,

that ruled Vijayanagar. A prominent ruler of this dynasty was Devaraya II (r. 1422-46 C.E.), who expanded the empire so that it sprawled across most of south India. The Sangama rulers were followed by the Saluvas at the end of the 15th century; they ruled briefly before the rise of the Tuluva dynasty in the early 16th century. Krishnadevaraya (r. 1510-29), who is considered the greatest ruler of Vijayanagar and during whose reign the boundaries of the empire touched both the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, belonged to the Tuluva dynasty. Meanwhile, the Bahmani Empire had imploded by the end of the 15th century and given rise to five principalities collectively referred to as the Deccan Sultanates ("The medieval Deccan", *Frontline*, December 20, 2019). In 1565, a coalition of these Deccan Sultanates allied briefly to defeat Vijayanagar, which was led by Aliya Ramaraya at the time ("Beyond the Hindu-Muslim binary" *Frontline*, January 18, 2019). Vijayanagar survived for more than a hundred years after this momentous battle ruled by descendants of Ramaraya known as the Aravidus, but it slowly toddled to its death, and later rulers abandoned their defeated capital.

RICH BIBLIOGRAPHY

There is a rich bibliography on the history of Vijayanagar. Following Robert Sewell's pioneering history of Vijayanagar published in 1900 (*The Forgotten Empire (Vijay-*

anagar): *A Contribution to the History of India*), a spate of other studies were published, including works by S. Krishnaswamy Ayyangar (*Sources of Vijayanagar History*, 1919), Henry Heras (*The Aravidu Dynasty of Vijayanagar*, 1927), B.A. Saletore (*Social and Political Life in the Vijayanagara Empire*, 1934) and K.A. Nilakanta Sastri and N. Venkata Ramanayya (*Further Sources of Vijayanagara History*, 1946). While these early historians did tremendous work furthering knowledge of the Vijayanagar era, later historians accused them of extending the religious bias of Sewell, who described Vijayanagar as a “Hindu bulwark against Muhammadan conquests”. There was also wrangling among these historians on the origins of the Sangama brothers: Were the founders of Vijayanagar Kannada or Telugu speakers? This debate continues to this day.

Research on Vijayanagar was extended later by historians such as Vasundhara Filliozat (*Vijayanagar as Seen by Domingo Paes and Fernao Nuniz*, 1977), Burton Stein (*Vijayanagara*, 1993) and Anila Verghese (*Hampi: Monumental Legacy*, 2002) and, more recently, by scholars such as Richard Eaton and Philip Wagoner (*Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India's Deccan Plateau, 1300-1600*, 2014) who have deepened and expanded knowledge of this era. Scholars associated with the multidisciplinary Vijayanagara Research Project (<https://www.penn.museum/sites/>

VRP/default.html) have added considerably to the research corpus of Vijayanagar as well. John Fritz and George Michell's work on the architectural history of Hampi should also be acknowledged: the duo has published coffee-table books such as *New Light on Hampi* (2001) and an accessible and authoritative guidebook (*Hampi Vijayanagara*, 2014). A new biography of Krishnadevaraya by Srinivas Reddy is a significant addition to this vast corpus (“Medieval monarch” *Frontline*, October 9, 2020).

Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat and Vasundhara Kavali-Filliozat—the husband-and-wife researcher pair who has been seriously studying Hampi since the 1960s—have now provided readers with their magnum opus, which collates decades of their research on Vijayanagar. A considerable amount of their research is available only in French, which denied English readers a chance to appreciate their scholarship over the years, so the publishers of the book under review must be complimented for producing this book in English as well. *Hampi: Sacred India Glorious India* will seem like a coffee-table book at first glance with lavish photographs by Bernard Grismayer and Roshane Saidnattar, but the scope of this book extends far beyond this. The text by the Filliozats is valuable as it explores political, social and religious aspects of Vijayanagar through an elaborate examination of its architecture. This minute examination of various monuments, which are



THE PERIMETER PILLARS of the central platform of the south-east mandapa at the Vitthala temple. (Below) The Garuda shrine at the Vitthala temple complex.



usually accompanied by intricate architectural drawings and explanatory captions, provides the window through which the glorious history of Vijayanagar unfolds.

RELIANCE ON INSCRIPTIONS

A novel aspect of this book, according to this reviewer, is that the Filliozats have worked primarily as epigraphists, relying almost entirely on inscriptions (“usually in Kannada language and script and sometimes in Telugu or Sanskrit”) to build their

story of Vijayanagar. The authors say that this is because “[t]he reliability of these different sources [on Hampi] is uneven, the most dependable being the inscriptions....We therefore considered it best to base the book primarily on the monuments and the inscriptions associated with them, and in the second place on direct literary references and texts that are the fundamental components of intellectual life in southern India.”

Before discussing the contents of the book in detail, it is important to men-

tion three points that stood out for this reviewer: First, the book extends its examination of the site of Hampi to the period before its elevation as the capital of Vijayanagar. This is a major departure from earlier published literature on Hampi, which focusses mostly on the imperial period. Second, on the Kannada-Telugu debate, the Filliozats vehemently fall on the Kannada side of the argument, writing: “They [the founders] named the city Vijayanagara, ‘City of Victory’, and their empire came to be known as Karnataka-samrajya, ‘Empire of Karnataka.’” Third, the Filliozats also argue against the notion that Vijayanagar existed as some kind of religious barrier against Muslim rulers of the north and write: “Their [Vijayanagar’s] reaction against pressure from the north was therefore not a straightforward Hindu repulse of Islamic ambitions, but simply a political response to forces sweeping down from the north.”

In the first chapter, which is titled “The Site of Hampi-Vijayanagara”, the

Filliozats discuss various physical facets of the architecture, providing a useful context for the later chapters that examine individual monuments in detail. Features of the civil construction and urban development such as architectural models, temple models, outer walls and fortifications, fortified gates, roads, water management, bridges and aqueducts are explained in this section. The second chapter looks at the political history of Hampi-Vijayanagar, and details of its pre-imperial history are revelatory as it was important enough to be “included successively in the kingdoms of the Chalukyas of Badami, the Rastrakutas, the Chalukyas of Kalyana and the Hoysalas”. There is an inscription dating back to 988 A.D., going back to the time of the Chalukyas of Badami, which “includes the first mention of a royal residence at the site”.

FOR SIVA

Subsequent chapters have been organised to reflect the different deities that gained ascendancy at Hampi. This is an uncommon way to examine the architectural history of the site compared with earlier literature but is helpful as it gives the reader an idea about which deities were privileged at different points in this abode of the gods. It is well-known that Hampi derived its name from the Goddess Pampa, the pre-eminent local goddess, who Siva Virupaksha marries. We also learn that “two great festivals are [still] held in commemoration of the betrothal and wedding of Virupaksha

and Pampa”. Thus, the orientation of the deities in the pre-imperial and early imperial period (between the 7th and 14th centuries) was primarily Shaivite, as the Filliozats demonstrate in the chapter “To the Glory of Siva”. *Hampi* states: “Virupaksha is the name of Siva’s linga in a huge complex standing at the foot of Hemakuta hill.”

The initial religious structures that formed part of the (later) Virupaksha temple complex date back to the Kalyana Chalukya period. Photographs of rows of lingas along the riverbed with prostrating devotees etched alongside on the rock face clearly show the reverence that early worshippers at Hampi had for Siva. Structures such as the giant statues of Ganesha and the temples of Ahobala Narasimha and Prasanna Virupaksha are also examined in detail here. The great Virupaksha temple complex was given its present appearance by Krishnadevaraya, who was crowned here in 1510.

In the chapter “To the Glory of Rama, 15th–16th Centuries”, the Filliozats write: “Several monuments were built for the worship of Rama at the cardinal points in Hampi.... The worship of this major deity and the presence of the Vaishnavite denomination in general have always existed at Hampi, but mainly as part of a broader Saivite orientation. A purely Vaishnavite movement developed at Hampi at the time of the kings who created and ruled over Vijayanagara from the fourteenth to the sixteenth

centuries.” The earliest Vaishnavite monument dedicated to Rama is the Ramachandra, or the Hazara Rama, temple. The sculptures and the bas-relief work present here are examined in detail, and the Filliozats’ experienced gaze also allows them to make connections such as identifying a man who is dressed in a long robe as “Katige Ahmed Khan”, who was a bodyguard of Devaraya II. Other temples dedicated to Rama in Hampi include the Kodanda Rama, the Malyavanta Raghunatha and the Pattabhirama temples.

Hanuman is a popular object of worship at Hampi, and the book states: “He [Hanuman] is present at Hampi at two levels: firstly, at the service of Rama, wherever the Ramayana is represented; secondly, as an important figure in his own right ... where he is the exclusive object of worship.” Hanuman was important for the Madhva community, and exponents of this strand of Hinduism such as Vyasa-tirtha (1460-1539) were prominent in the Vijayanagar court, gaining importance at the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century. It is also this community’s ascendancy that in turn emphasised the Vaishnavite turn of the Vijayanagar rulers.

VITTHALA TEMPLE COMPLEX

There is a substantial and comprehensive examination of the temple complex of Vitthala, which is arguably the most impressive site at Hampi for both lay tourists and advanced

PHOTOGRAPHS: BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



THE LOTUS MAHAL pavilion.

scholars of temple architecture. The sculptures at the site continue to enthral viewers almost 500 years after they were first erected, and the iconography is drawn from the mythology of Vishnu. The Filliozats themselves are certainly in awe of the complex and write: “One can only admire the inventiveness of this whole composition.... But make no mistake; this is no human king’s palace, but a palace fit for the gods.” The Filliozats’ extensive epigraphical analysis of the site informs readers “about the life of the temple: the priests and attendants of all kinds, the regular worshippers, the pilgrims and the people who lived in the area”. The Filliozats discovered 28 inscriptions in the temple’s compound, of which 22 are in Kannada, 3 in Sanskrit, 2 in Telugu and 1 in Tamil. An interesting inscription at the site provides a detailed note on how Brahmins celebrated a festival in Vijayanagar in the 16th century.

The close study of the inscriptions shows the rise of the powerful clan of the Aravidus as the power of the Tuluva dynasty faded. The Aravidus introduced

“Srivaishnavite worship and rituals into the temple of Vithala especially those associated with the masters of the Ramanuja tradition”. This is an important discovery for political historians of Vijayanagar because this epigraphical evidence displays the rising influence of Aliya Ramaraya, the leader of the Aravidu clan, who gradually supplanted himself over later Tuluva rulers.

Hampi then moves its scrutiny to the temple of Krishna. This Vaishnavite enclosure was overlaid on an earlier set of Shaivite sanctuaries during the reign of Krishnadevaraya, who also installed the idol of Krishna there after seizing it from the Gajapathi rulers of Orissa. This was the most significant military victory of his kingly career. In fact, the Filliozats argue that constructions at the Krishna temple symbolise the power of Krishnadevaraya “even more than the temple of Vithala does”. The inscription at the site records the majesty of Krishnadevaraya. Two stanzas of this panegyric are reproduced here:

“He [Krishnadevaraya], who is called

‘king of kings’, supreme lord of kings, sovereign over the three kings (*gajapati, asvapati, narapati*, ‘master of elephants, horses and men’), who sows fear in the hearts of enemy kings,

“He, the sultan ‘protector of the gods of the Hindu kings’, crushing evil tigers, rejoicing in the titles of Gandabherunda, ‘powerful bird of prey’ (holding in his claws) multitudes of elephants, and others.”

The close scrutiny of two other structures, the temples of Lakshmi-Narasimha and Tiruvengalanatha, round off this chapter. The final chapter is dedicated “To the Glory of Jina”. Two temples of Jain tirthankaras, which can still be seen in the precincts of Hampi, reveal how the Jains made their presence felt even though the community itself was not widespread, but it was still considered important enough for the Vijayanagar rulers to erect structures in deference to this faith and its followers.

SHAIVITE CONTINUANCE

A discerning modern visitor to Hampi is often intrigued by the fact that while the Vaishnavite temples have all been abandoned and no religious rituals are performed at these “dead” temples, the Shaivite structures such as the Virupaksha temple continue to thrive to this day. The Filliozats, while thorough in their architectural inspections and perusal of inscriptions, offer only a cursory answer to why this is so, saying that the Vaishnavite deities “never at-

tained the same appeal in the general population of the area [as the Shaivite deities]”. This is one aspect that should have been evaluated more rigorously in the book as the Filliozats’ speculative answer raises further questions. Did the rulers of the Deccan Sultanates specifically target the Vaishnavite temples after the Battle of Talikota because of their association with Aliya Ramaraya? Or, as some scholars have argued, did the Shaivite population of the area—bitter over their deities and temples losing the royal patronage and goodwill of the later rulers of Vijayanagar—pillage these temples themselves?

There is one egregious error in the book: In their preface, the editors Christophe Hioco and Luca Poggi write that Vijayanagar “was conquered by the Moghul emperor Babur in the sixteenth century”. This is a major *faux pas* as Vijayanagar was conquered in 1565 (35 years after the death of Babur) by an alliance of the Deccan Sultanates when the Mughal Empire, ruled by Akbar at the time, had not yet turned its attention to south India. The Mughal advent in southern India happened only in the next century when Jahangir, Shah Jahan and, finally, Aurangzeb, incrementally expanded their realm by conquering the Deccan Sultanates. However, this error is clearly an editorial oversight and hardly detracts from the many critical observations the Filliozats make, which fill crucial gaps in the study of the magnificent Vijayanagar Empire. □