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The Cultural Unity of the Deccan Plateau, 1347–1687

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Between the 14th and 17th centuries, the states of the Deccan drew on the same resources to base their authority -- the memory of the prestigious Chalukyas maharajas of Kalyana, and the prestige associated with Persian language and culture.

A durable fallacy plaguing the study of the Deccan has been the notion that, from the 14th to 17th centuries, the plateau was split into a “Muslim” north and a “Hindu” south, separated by the Krishna River. Implicit in this formulation is an assumption of two bounded and incompatible religions displaced onto territory.

In *A Forgotten Empire* (1900), Robert Sewell published the earliest modern study of the medieval state of Vijayanagara, which sprawled over most of peninsular India south of the Krishna between 1347 and 1565. In this book, Sewell famously characterized that state as “a Hindu bulwark against Muhammadan conquest” (xiii). To the north of that river—the Deccan’s “Muslim” portion, in this understanding—lay the Bahmani sultanate, which was also established in 1347 and was succeeded around 1500 by a number of smaller sultanates, until the late 17th century when all of them were absorbed by the Mughals. Throughout the 20th century, the plateau was typically studied by two cadres of scholars. Working mainly with Persian or Urdu sources, one of them studied the sultanates of the northern Deccan, while another, working with mainly Sanskrit or Dravidian materials, studied Vijayanagara and the south. Living in different disciplinary worlds, the two cadres wrote of two different historical worlds divided by the Krishna River, and also—in their minds—by religion.

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Recent research, however, reveals a more complex picture, one of a plateau far more unified and interconnected, both culturally and historically, than was earlier thought. Between the 14th and 17th centuries, the major states of the medieval Deccan, both north and south, simultaneously tapped into a common substratum of indigenous culture *and* a common superstratum of transregional culture. In Vijayanagara, the Bahmani kingdom, and the latter’s principal offshoots—the sultanates of Ahmadnagar, Bijapur, and Golconda—rulers believed that both strata were charged with power and authority. They therefore sought to associate themselves and their courts with those cultures, thereby bulking up their own claims to legitimacy. The indigenous elements these states displayed, which were readily intelligible to their Deccani subjects, can be traced back to the defunct but powerful and prestigious Western Chalukyas of Kalyana (973-1189), whose empire had once spanned most of Maharashtra, Andhra, and Karnataka. At the same time, these Deccani states also associated themselves with the culture of the contemporary Persianate world, a transregional domain that, though originally foreign to the Deccan, was just as prestigious as the Kalyana Chalukyas. By publicly displaying elements of Persianate culture, Deccani states visually participated in an expansive, cosmopolitan world that lay beyond the plateau. This sort of mixing of the local and the transregional has made the history of the Deccan in this period a complex subject of study. It is clear, however, that to reduce the plateau to a polarized zone divided by two religious traditions—Hinduism and Islam—is not just simplistic; it is belied by considerable evidence.

Invoking Chalukya memories

Consider how the major states of the Deccan drew upon the illustrious legacy of the Chalukya empire, whose capital of Kalyana lay in the heart of the plateau just west of Bidar. What these states did was hardly unique in world history. In west Europe in the 8th century, the emperor Charlemagne arranged to have columns of the erstwhile Roman empire hauled up from Italy to northern Europe where they adorned his capital at Aachen (presently in western Germany near the Dutch border). He did this in order to dramatize his claimed association with a glorious empire that had collapsed some four centuries earlier, but which was still vividly remembered across Europe. Similarly, at the height of the Vijayanagara empire’s glory in the mid-16th century, the Chalukya empire—like the Roman empire in Charlemagne’s day—was still vividly remembered even though its sovereign authority had vanished some four centuries earlier. Seeking to associate himself with the former Chalukya imperium, Vijayanagara’s de facto ruler, Rama Raya (r. 1542-65), gave himself such grandiose titles as “Radiant King of Kalyana,” “The One who Captured the City of Kalyana,” and even

“Chalukya Emperor” (Eaton and Wagoner, 2014, 89).

The same strategy is seen in material culture. In the early- or mid-16th century an elaborate Chalukya-period stepped tank was disassembled stone by stone from some unidentified site and hauled to metropolitan Vijayanagara, where it was meticulously re-assembled in the heart of the capital city’s Royal Centre (Ibid., 106-13), [Fig. 1].



Fig. 1: Vijayanagara. Chalukya-period stepped tank of chloritic schist in the Royal Centre (Richard M. Eaton)

We see a similar thing in the two-storeyed pillared hall, or *mandapa*, situated at the eastern end of the chariot street of the city’s great temple dedicated to Virupaksha, Vijayanagara’s foundational state-deity [Fig. 2]. Whereas the structure’s upper level is supported by nondescript, plain-shafted columns made from local granite, the *mandapa*’s lower level displays twelve spectacular columns delicately carved from blue-green schist. These were re-used Chalukya originals brought to the Vijayanagara capital from some unidentified site (Ibid., 95-96). Situated on the ground level and therefore readily visible to passers-by, these magnificent antiques—unlike the ordinary columns above—were clearly intended to be seen by the public. By strategically re-using Chalukya architecture in both the stepped tank and the pillared hall, Vijayanagara’s rulers were invoking the memory of a glorious earlier empire, thereby burnishing their own claims to authority. Charlemagne would have understood.



Fig. 2: Vijayanagara. Two-storeyed *mandapa* at end of Virupaksha bazaar (Richard M. Eaton)

Turning to the northern Deccan—the plateau’s so-called “Muslim zone”—one sees rulers behaving in the same way, and for the same reason. Like their contemporaries to the south, the ‘Adil Shahi sultans of Bijapur also associated themselves with the erstwhile maharajas of Kalyana, whose aesthetic vision they deeply admired. Around 1575 Rafi’ al-Din Shirazi, an Iran-born statesman and chronicler patronized by Bijapur’s court, visited an area in Karnataka south of Hubli-Dharwad, where he expressed astonishment at the Chalukyas’ architectural legacy that he encountered. “Kings and nobles,” he wrote,

imitated one another in perfecting architecture and in building many exquisite and grand temples. In subsequent years, many of these have fallen into a state of ruin. But some remain standing, and four hundred temples are completely intact, having been built with the utmost of painstaking and elegant workmanship. When we saw them we were struck with awe. (Rafi’ al-Din Shirazi, *Tazkirat al-muluk*. Cited in Eaton and Wagoner 2014, 145. My translation.)

Shirazi’s patron, Sultan ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah I (r. 1558-80) of Bijapur, visually associated his kingdom with the Kalyana maharajas when in 1568 he framed a secondary entrance in the city wall’s southern sector with a beautifully preserved and elegant Chalukya-period ritual gate (*makara-torana*) [Fig. 3]. The gate features fabulous crocodiles at either end and an image of a dancing *?iva* in the centre carrying a trident and drum, flanked on one side by Vishnu with a conch and discus and on the other by Brahma with a swan (Eaton and Wagoner 2014, 137-38).



Fig. 3: Bijapur. Chalukya-period *makara-torana* in secondary gate near the city's Landa Qassab gate (Courtesy of Yigal Bronner)

In displaying Chalukya art in this manner, the sultan was following the lead of his father, Ibrahim I (r. 1535-58), who in 1544 had built Bijapur's formidable citadel, which was encircled by a moat and walls pierced on its southern side by a grand entranceway. Everything about this gateway evokes a Chalukya world. At eye level just before one entered its inner courtyard, two slabs were placed in the wall containing inscriptions issued respectively by two renowned Chalukya emperors, Somavarma II (r. 1068-76) and Vikramaditya VI (r. 1076-1126). Written in old Kannada and legible to most educated people in the 16th century, these inscriptions served as political icons, displaying an imagined continuity between the prestigious but long-defunct Chalukyas and the 'Adil Shahi sultans. Then, upon entering the gateway's inner courtyard, one was surrounded by a virtual forest of 24 re-used columns, most of them Chalukya period, divided in two groups of twelve. The sultan's recycling of antique columns in this courtyard —like those placed in the *mandapa* of Vijayanagara's Virupaksha temple — was not random. The columns most visible to visitors were the very finest examples of Chalukya art, whereas those in less prominent locations were produced by the Yadavas (ca. 1187-1317), a Chalukya successor state (Eaton and Wagoner 2014, 129-33).

Drawing on Kakatiya aesthetics

Whereas rulers in Vijayanagara and Bijapur invoked the memory of their common Chalukya past, Bijapur's neighbour to the east, the Qutb Shahi rulers of Golconda, were inspired by the Kakatiya maharajas of Warangal (r. 1163-1323), the Chalukyas' successor state in the Andhra country. Given that the borders of both the Golconda sultanate and their Kakatiya predecessors roughly mapped over the Deccan's Telugu-speaking area, and given that the Kakatias famously patronized Telugu literature, it is not surprising that Golkonda's ruling classes imagined their kingdom as a Telugu realm, and the sultans themselves as Telugu sultans. Sultan Ibrahim Qutb Shah (r. 1550-80) was known in Telugu sources as *Ibharama cakravarti* ("emperor Ibrahim"), and was so steeped in Telugu aesthetics that he would sit, as one court poet put it, "floating on waves of bliss" listening to the *Mahabharata* recited to him in its classical Telugu version (Eaton, 2020, 135-36). The memory of the Kakatiya dynasty was kept alive in the Qutb Shahi sultanate in large part by the many *nayakwaris* and Niyogi Brahmins in state service. The former were Telugu-speaking Hindu warriors whose importance in the Andhra country dated back to the Kakatiya period, when they formed the mainstay of that dynasty's military system. And the Niyogis were worldly-oriented Brahmins who served the Qutb Shahi regime in positions ranging from governors and court advisors down to village accountants.

The most remarkable legacy of the Kakatiya rulers happens to be one of the Deccan’s most prominent cities. Though often (and mistakenly) called an ‘Islamic city’, Hyderabad, established in 1591 by Sultan Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah (r. 1580-1612), reflects a uniquely Kakatiya aesthetic vision. Specifically, its inspiration and character drew on the layout and design of the Kakatiyas’ capital at Warangal, established in the late 12th century [Fig. 4]. In fact, Warangal is South Asia’s best surviving example of a city replicating classical Indian conceptions of the world. In this understanding, a great circular continent is divided in four quarters and surrounded by a series of ring-shaped oceans, with the cosmic mountain Meru, where Siva dwells, lying at its centre.

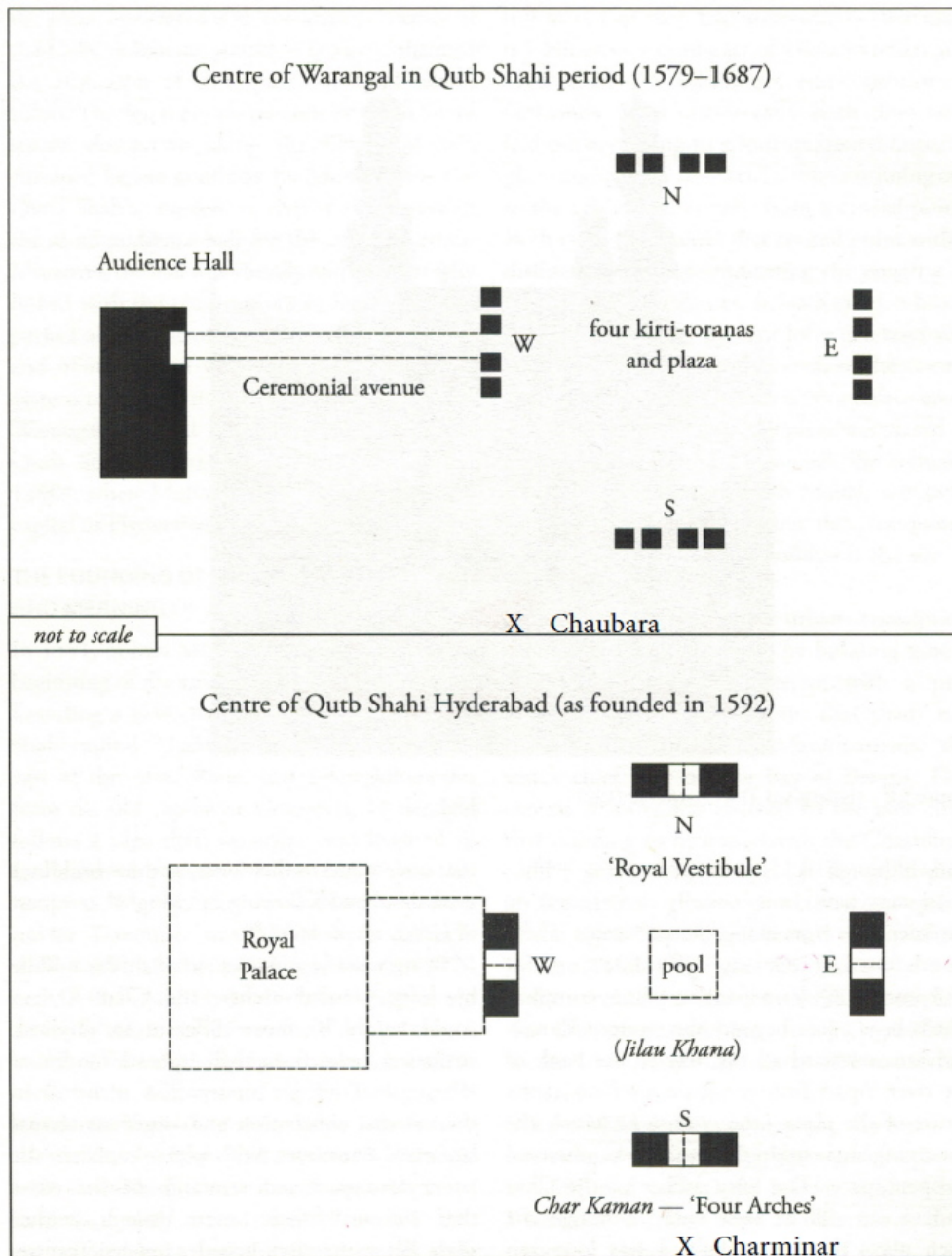


Fig. 4: Plans of centre of Warangal fort and centre of Hyderabad in the late 16th century (Richard M. Eaton and Phillip B. Wagoner)

At Warangal, the area within the inner, stone wall replicated the central continent, in the middle of which stood a great temple that was dedicated to Siva and represented Mount Meru. Beyond the stone wall lay a moat representing a cosmic sea, with a second, outer wall and moat corresponding to the sea surrounding a second, ring-shaped continent and another sea. Standing at cardinal directions around the temple precincts, four majestic gateways symbolized the sources of four rivers that flow outwards from Mount Meru, defining the universe’s four quarters. Having governed Warangal throughout the 16th century, Golkonda’s ruling classes—including its

nayakwaris and Niyogi Brahmins—were well aware of these architectural features and their meaning, as well as the homology between *Īva* as the lord of the universe and the Kakatiya king as lord of the human realm. Telugu histories of the Kakatiyas had appeared from around 1550, and Telugu verses praising Ibrahim Qutb Shah (r. 1550-80) specifically identified him as a *chakravartin* (“world-conqueror”) who had crossed the seven seas and circled the seven continents of classic Indian mythology. In short, Warangal’s open plaza and four ceremonial gateways carried rich memories of the Kakatiyas’ past and their imperial aspirations.

The Charminar ... combined Indic and Persianate forms, while set in a city whose layout was inspired by the memory of Telangana’s most famous regional dynasty.

That Warangal was in Muhammad Quli Shah’s mind when he planned his new city is seen in the striking parallels between Hyderabad and the Kakatiya capital. Both cities were built on a plain seven kilometers southeast of a former capital (Hanamkonda and Golconda respectively). Like Warangal, Hyderabad was laid out on a four-quartered plan produced by four avenues extending in cardinal directions from a distinctive structure that indicated the crossing point of those four avenues. Both cities featured a broad, open plaza defined by four lofty gateways, or *toranas*, located immediately north of that central crossing point. At Warangal, these are the plaza’s four ceremonial gateways, and in Hyderabad, four great portals (the Char Kaman). In both cities a palace complex was situated immediately west of the plaza. At Warangal, that was the site of the so-called Khush Mahal; and at Hyderabad, the Qutb Shahi royal palace (subsequently destroyed).

Most strikingly, in Warangal a simple, two-storeyed open-pillared structure, or *chaubara*, stands to the southwest of the plaza where the city’s four roads meet. Taking the idea of marking the city’s centre in this way, Muhammad Quli built to the south of Hyderabad’s plaza what has become the Deccan’s most iconic monument—the famous Charminar. Far more complex and sophisticated than Warangal’s *chaubara*, the Charminar features spacious arches, a domed chamber, two upper storeys, a mezzanine, four tall minarets, and a richly decorated mosque. The apex of the uppermost storey features a large solar lotus—the iconic Indian symbol of life and energy—with 12 smaller lotuses placed around it in the manner of the zodiac. The Charminar thus combined Indic and Persianate forms, while set in a city whose layout was inspired by the memory of Telangana’s most famous regional dynasty (Ibid., 155-57).

Associations with the Persianate world

While invoking the Deccan’s past to reinforce their claims to authentic, local authority, Vijayanagara and the sultanates to its north also associated themselves with the Persianate world—a prestigious, transregional cultural realm that stretched from the Balkans to Burma, and from central Asia to south India. Between the 11th and 18th centuries, Persian served not only as a contact language for merchants on the Silk Road, or the language of scribal communities serving state bureaucracies dating to the days of Cyrus and Darius the Great. A growing canon of Persian literature—including epics, lyrical and mystical poetry, popular stories, discursive treatises, and histories— informed a broad range of culture, including dress, cuisine, architecture, music, courtly rituals and etiquette, art, norms of comportment, urban layout, and more. Furthermore, that canon defined a moral and social order that was sustained not by coercive power, but by the circulation of peoples and texts through far-flung formal or informal networks that linked such institutional bases as schools, royal courts, or Sufi shrines. Because this order was cosmopolitan and mainly secular in nature, peoples of various ethnic or religious identities in central, west, and south Asia could, and did, subscribe to its norms and sensibilities. We see this in the Deccan as well.

Beginning with the Bahmani rulers of Gulbarga and Bidar, the sultanates of the northern Deccan from the late 14th century on systematically recruited administrative, military, and literary talent from the Iranian plateau. Especially after the central Asian warlord Timur (d. 1405) had astonished the world with his spectacular conquests in central Asia, the Middle East, and north India and owing to his lavish support for Persianate art and architecture in his capital at Samarqand, upstart rulers across India imitated his pattern of patronage. This is seen, for example, in the stunning architecture at the Bahmanis’ capital, Bidar, both within the citadel and throughout the old city, such as at the *madrasa* of Mahmud Gawan (1472), with its domes, arches, cross-vaulting construction, and brilliantly colored tiles (Eaton and Wagoner 2014, 147). The same aesthetic vision would be replicated by the Bahmanis’ successor states in Ahmadnagar, Elichpur (in Berar), Bijapur, and Golconda.

The essentially secular nature of the Persianate world also made it seductively attractive to the Deccan’s non-Muslim rulers, even before the days of Timur or the Delhi sultanate’s earliest raids in the Deccan (from 1292). At the royal court of the Kakatiya maharajas of Warangal, the poet Baddena (d. 1280) penned the following lines:

To acquire wealth: make the people prosper. To make the people prosper: justice is the means. O Kirti Narayana! They say that justice is the treasury of kings (Wagoner 1995, 95).

In linking wealth, prosperity, and justice in this way, this aphorism presents a unified ideology in which divine agency is notably absent; justice alone was the basis of social and moral order. This characteristically Persianate formulation paraphrases similar aphorisms that can be dated to 8th century Iraq and were disseminated across the Persianate world from the 10th century on in a genre of literature called Mirrors for Princes. The fact that such ideas could reach the Deccan before the plateau had experienced any contact with the Delhi sultanate speaks to the considerable prestige of those ideas, and to their ability to be readily assimilated by peoples of diverse political, ethnic, or religious identities.

Aspiring to the most powerful titles then available to them, Hindu rulers very early on began styling themselves “sultan,” as when one of the founders of Vijayanagara, Marappa, declared himself “sultan among Indian kings” (*hindu-raya-suratalah*) in 1347.

Simply put, courts and courtiers in the Deccan, whether Hindu or Muslim, wished to participate in this transregional, cosmopolitan world, and to make a public display of such participation. For example, the characteristically Persianate notion of an all-powerful sultan whose authority transcended space, ethnicity, or religion was attractive to ambitious Indian warlords or kings residing far beyond the Delhi sultanate’s frontiers. Aspiring to the most powerful titles then available to them, Hindu rulers very early on began styling themselves ‘sultan’, as when one of the founders of Vijayanagara, Marappa, declared himself ‘sultan among Indian kings’ (*hindu-raya-suratalah*) in 1347. His brothers Bukka and Harihara adapted the same title in 1352 and 1354 respectively, and in 1355 the former styled himself simply ‘sultan’ (Eaton 2020, 83). Of course, the brothers also deployed grandiose Sanskrit imperial titles, indicating their eagerness to use any available means to inflate their claims to legitimate authority.

Unlike the Sacred Centre, whose religious, historical, and architectural traditions were rooted in the southern plateau, Vijayanagara’s Royal Centre was self-consciously cosmopolitan, urbane, and open to the outside world.

In the early 16th century, by which time Persianate culture had become more securely entrenched across the Deccan, Vijayanagara’s ruling class was displaying a much wider spectrum of that culture. In 1520 Vijayanagara’s Krishna Raya (r. 1509-29) seized the fort of Raichur from Bijapur, and to celebrate his victory he built a new gateway, the Rangin Darwaza, in the city’s northern wall. A frieze running along the cornice of the gateway’s inner courtyard depicts the king seated in royal splendour and at ease, surrounded by female attendants [Fig. 5]. Especially striking is the king’s tall, conical headgear called *kullayi* in Telugu, a term derived from the Persian *kulah*, meaning “headgear,” including that associated with royalty, such as “crown” (Eaton 2020, 194). In the temple at Lepakshi, located 100 km north of Bangalore, 16th century mural paintings images depict Vijayanagara courtiers wearing the same distinctive headgear (Wagoner 1996, 856-58). Just as the item itself was assimilated into Vijayanagara’s elite culture, the Persian word for it, like the word ‘sultan’, entered Telugu as a loanword.



Fig. 5: Raichur. Naurangi Darwaza: detail of frieze in first inner courtyard, showing the Vijayanagara king Krishna Raya and female attendants (Richard M. Eaton)

The Vijayanagara court's attraction to Persianate culture is also seen in the city's secular architecture. Art historians conventionally understand the capital city as divided into two conceptually distinct zones: a royal centre and a sacred centre (Fritz *et al.* 1984, 9-55). The latter, which is the older part of the city, hugs the southern shores of the Tungabhadra river. Between the 9th and 14th century, a riverside temple dedicated to a local deity grew into a major pilgrimage site that focused on the temple of Virupaksha, upon which the state of Vijayanagara would grow. As that happened, successive rulers patronized the construction of more temples nearby, in styles consistent with the architectural traditions of the southern portion of peninsular India, which the state's emperors had conquered and were governing.

Unlike the sacred centre, whose religious, historical, and architectural traditions were rooted in the southern plateau, Vijayanagara's royal centre was self-consciously cosmopolitan, urbane, and open to the outside world. Its complex of palaces, audience halls, ceremonial platforms, and royal residences functioned like a vast stage on which, through rounds of elaborate celebrations and political rituals, the empire's royalty and nobility enacted their ruling authority. In this noisy, bustling zone Portuguese ambassadors, Turkish horse dealers, Muslim mercenaries, foreign spies, and merchants from throughout the Indian Ocean region rubbed shoulders with each other and with the native population. In such a forthrightly public space, the state's ruling classes displayed their association with the culture most readily identified with transregional cosmopolitanism – that of the Persianate world.

It is, then, in the city's royal centre that we find the so-called “elephant stables,” the “guards' quarters,” the “queen's bath,” the “Lotus Mahal”, and a number of watchtowers and pavilions that exhibit a profusion of domes, arches, and cross-vaulted arcades like those seen in the northern Deccan [Fig. 6]. Such visual cues would have encouraged an outside visitor at once to identify the patrons of such monuments with the wider Persianate world. Indeed, that is what happened in May 1443 when ‘Abd al- Razzaq Samarqandi, an ambassador from the court of Timur's son and successor in Herat, Shah Rukh (r. 1405-47), reached Vijayanagara's royal court. In a formal courtly audience, the king, Deva Raya II (r. 1422-46), told the ambassador how pleased he was that “the great padishah” (Shah Rukh) had sent him an emissary (Thackston 1989, 311). For his part, ‘Abd al-Razzaq was impressed with how Persianized the court appeared to him. The king, he noted, wore a tunic of Chinese silk known in Telugu by a variant of the Persian term *qaba*, referring to a long-sleeved pullover made of cotton or silk that had first appeared in Iran in the 11th and 12th centuries (Ibid., 310). Like the conical headgear (*kulah*) later worn by Krishna Raya, the tunic was associated with elite, Persianate culture. The ambassador was especially awed by the public buildings he encountered, one of which, he wrote, resembled a *chihil sutun* (literally “forty columns”), a stock phrase for a multi-columned Persianate-style palace. He noted that Deva Raya “was seated in a splendid *chihil sutun*,” and described another hall as “a *chihil sutun* with nine arches decorated with perfect subtlety”(ibid., 310, 313). Clearly, the Timurid ambassador recognized these structures as belonging to a genre of Persianate palace architecture that was readily familiar to him.



Fig. 6: Vijayanagara. The so-called ‘elephant stables’ in the royal centre (C. Rammanohar Reddy)

Archaeological evidence supports the ambassador’s observations. One palace in the heart of the royal centre, the Hundred Columned Hall with its ten rows of ten columns each, adheres to a same plan and layout as the celebrated Hundred Columned Hall in Persepolis (5th c. BC), the ceremonial capital of the ancient Persian empire (Fritz et.al, 1984, 102-3; Sewell, 1984, 263-64), [Fig. 7].

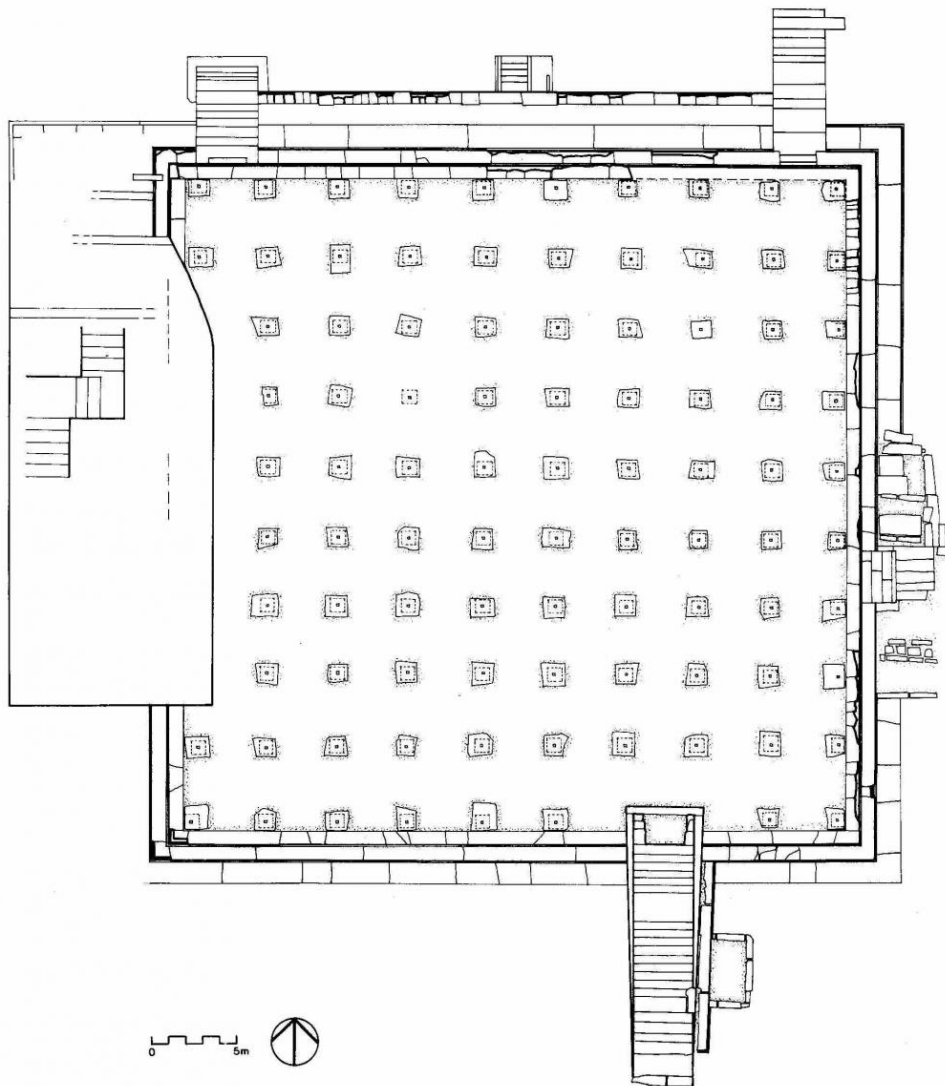


Fig. 7: Vijayanagara. Plan of Hundred Columned Hall (John M Fritz and George Michell, Vijayanagara Research Project)

Vijayanagara’s great platform known as the Mahanavami Dibba, built in stages between the 14th and early 16th centuries, is adorned with bas-relief panels that depict, among other figures, foreign merchants appearing to be central Asian Turks leading their horses to be received by the king and his attendants (Michell 2014, 80). In 1430, just over a decade before ‘Abd al-Razzaq reached the capital, Deva Raya had employed 10,000 Turkish troops in his armed forces (Michell 1979, 211). Both Muslim cavalymen and Turkish horse merchants would therefore have been a familiar sight in the capital, which the Timurid ambassador would surely have noticed. Indeed, Vijayanagara’s recruitment of such soldiers continued well into the next century, as when the empire’s autocrat Rama Raya hired 3,000 Deccan-born Muslim troops that the sultan of Bijapur had dismissed in 1535 (Briggs 1966, 3:47). Tombs and mosques located in the urban core northeast of the royal centre indicate where such troops and their officers were settled. Krishna Raya so valued his Muslim soldiers that in his 1520 invasion of Raichur he placed them in the vanguard of his troops (Sewell 1984, 329). Sculptures of Muslim warriors even appear guarding the city’s most important Hindu temples. On a free-standing hall in the walled compound of the Vitthala temple, Turkish-appearing warriors are depicted, three-quarters human in size, riding lion-like beasts and armed with diverse weapons (Michell, 84-85), [Fig. 8].



Fig. 8: Vijayanagara. Sculpture of Turkish-appearing warriors in the Vitthala temple compound (Courtesy of John M. Fritz and George Michell)

Conclusion

The Deccan plateau in the 14th to 17th centuries was not so much a sacred realm, far less a place of two mutually exclusive sacred realms, as it was a cosmopolitan crossroads. Peoples of many cultures circulated through overlapping religious, political, and commercial networks. Long-distance merchants brought horses, precious metals, and other goods from the coasts to the Deccan's interior. Jain, Hindu, and Muslim pilgrims moved in all directions. Sufis, ascetics, and lay seekers circulated from place to place, or from person to person, pursuing salvation, wisdom, or more mundane goals. Thousands of adventurers and men of arms participated in the Deccan's vast military labour market, moving from court to court seeking employment by rulers, commanders, or chieftains to whom they might offer their service. None of these people appear to have experienced any civilizational barrier between the plateau's northern and southern halves of the sort claimed by writers like Sewell, who seem to have read history backwards, projecting into the past a 20th century preoccupation with religious identity. Indeed, Sewell's thesis is contradicted by a considerable body of evidence.

This essay has argued that rulers to the north and south of the Krishna associated themselves both with once-powerful local dynasties — in particular the Chalukyas of Kalyana — and also with cosmopolitan Persianate culture. They appropriated the former, which were indigenous and long defunct (but well remembered), by reaching back in time. And they appropriated the latter, which was transregional and contemporary, by reaching out in space. But how did the Deccan's common people view the plateau? If ruling elites neither saw nor experienced a religious divide between north and south, what about the masses of commoners?

|| [T]he *hon*'s association with an ancient and familiar currency had led bankers and merchants north of the Krishna to invest more trust in Vijayanagara's coinage than in that of the Bahmanis.

A reliable guide here is coinage, which was used by all social classes, elite and commoners alike (Wagoner 2014, 457-80). When the Bahmani and Vijayanagara kingdoms were established in the mid-14th century, both states minted their own coins, which initially circulated only within their respective realms. Whereas the Bahmanis introduced a currency system consisting of dinars and tankas inherited from the Delhi sultanate, Vijayanagara issued a gold coin, the *hon*, that was ultimately derived from the currency of the Chalukyas of Kalyana [Fig. 9(a)]. However, already in the reign of the second Bahmani sultan, Muhammad Shah I (r. 1358-75), Hindu money-changers in the northern Deccan were melting down locally minted gold dinars and tankas and sending the bullion across the river to the south, where it was re-struck as Vijayanagara *hons*, or smaller denominations of that coin (Ibid., 472). The newly minted currency then found its way back north to Bahmani territory, where it was used for commercial transactions, paying revenue, and so

forth. Owing to this pattern of minting and movement of money, throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, far more Vijayanagara coinage circulated in Bahmani territory than did the Bahmanis' own coinage. In fact, more Vijayanagara coinage circulated in the Bahmani kingdom than in Vijayanagara itself (Wagoner 2014, 469)! Evidently, the hon's association with an ancient and familiar currency had led bankers and merchants north of the Krishna to invest more trust in Vijayanagara's coinage than in that of the Bahmanis. Moreover, commoners in both rural and urban areas seem to have preferred the smaller, more versatile, and more familiar Vijayanagara coins for local purchases and payments.



Fig. 9(a): Gold hon minted by king Krishna Raya (1509-29) of Vijayanagara (Courtesy of Phillip B. Wagoner)

Even after Vijayanagara's effective collapse in 1565, that kingdom's ever-diminishing coinage continued to circulate in the northern Deccan, but in such demand that the northern sultanates, succumbing to reality, began assessing agricultural and commercial taxes in the hon, and not exclusively in their own dinars or tankas. From the 1580s on, the *hon* or its smaller denominations were the only type of coins mentioned in sultanate inscriptions pertaining to revenue matters. Ultimately, those sultanates – first Ahmadnagar, then Golconda, and finally Bijapur -- had to go further and begin minting their own *hons*, or smaller denominations thereof. These coins bore exactly the same standard of weight and purity as the old Vijayanagara-minted coins, but without the Hindu images or the Sanskrit legends that had appeared on the Vijayanagara originals [Fig. 9(b)]. Yet even this compromise proved unacceptable to the public. In 1654 Bijapuri officials noted, with evident dismay, that

the bankers, merchants, the subjects and others residing in villages, towns, and marketplaces included in the district of Sholapur refuse to accept *huns* bearing our name-stamp ["Muhammad Shah"], do not exchange it for the coins of smaller denominations, and do not use it in sale or purchase. What boldness it is since it bears our name-stamp! (Khare 1954, 131. Cited in Wagoner 2014).



Fig. 9(b): Gold hon minted by Sultan Muhammad 'Adil Shah (1627-1665) of Bijapur (Courtesy of the American Numismatic Society)

By 1674 things had reached such a state that Bijapur's officials approved a request that the Muslim functionaries of a mosque in Hyderabad could receive their annual maintenance in "genuine" hons (*h?n-i khar?*)—that is, coins that had been minted by Vijayanagara over a century earlier, which would likely have borne Sanskrit lettering and images of Hindu deities (Wagoner 2014, 477; Desai 1989, 71; *Epigraphia*, 50-52, Plate XX(b)). [Fig. 9(a)].

Notwithstanding Sewell's characterization of Vijayanagara as a "Hindu bulwark against Muhammadan conquest," ordinary people actually living at that time clearly experienced the plateau as a single economic zone that transcended political frontiers and cultural differences. Surely, then, it is time to put aside the notion that the premodern Deccan plateau was split into two impermeable halves — one Muslim, one Hindu — divided by the Krishna river. While elites on both sides of that river looked outwards to the greater Persianate world, they also looked to their shared past in the Deccan, not least because their own tax-paying subjects — bankers and commoners alike — remained emotionally rooted in that past.

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