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CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

The overall aim of this volume is to provide an introduction to the architecture and art of Southern India under the Vijayanagara empire and the lesser kingdoms that succeeded it. The chronological span of the survey opens with the foundation of Vijayanagara in the middle of the fourteenth century and closes with the decline of the successor states in the middle of the eighteenth century. The most important of these successor states were founded by the Nayakas, originally governors under the Vijayanagara emperors; but other figures also emerged as independent rulers towards the end of this era.

As an attempt to encompass one aspect of Southern Indian culture in these centuries, this study contributes to what is now a well-established field of enquiry. Historians are among the first to have recognised the significance of the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods. They have reconsidered the political structure of the empire, investigated the peasant economy of large land holdings, and examined the accounts of the lucrative overseas trade. Historians of religion constitute another group of scholars that has turned to Southern India in these centuries. Their documentation of cult shrines and rites of worship, as well as of myths and legends, has gone far to reveal the rich diversity of religious traditions that flourished at this time, and indeed continues to do so today. The most recent wave of interest seems to be directed towards an anthropology of courtly culture, particularly under the Nayakas and their contemporaries. Translations of royal epics and poems provide new perspectives on the lives and ideals of Southern Indian rulers and courtiers. Such enquiries contribute to an understanding of the historical, religious and cultural context of buildings and their associated sculptures and paintings. They have not, however, received the attention that they deserve.

## NEGLECT OF THE SUBJECT

Scholarly disregard of architecture and art under the Vijayanagara and Nayaka dynasties is not easy to understand. A large number of monuments survives from the era, particularly temples, many in a fine state of preservation and still in use; there is an abundance of stone and metal sculptures, and painted panels and cloths, either on permanent display in their original settings or preserved in public and private collections. Furthermore, much is known about the background of many buildings and works of art in this era; a wealth of inscriptions and documents provides information on donors and dates. If this



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abundance of data has not attracted scholarly attention over the years, then other factors must be involved in order to account for the obviously negative impact of the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods on art historians.

The first and most obvious explanation for this indifference is the periodisation of the subject itself. Scholars concerned with 'Buddhist' and 'Hindu' phases of Indian architecture, sculpture and painting tend to ignore the later centuries since they fall within what is considered to be the 'Islamic period'. Meanwhile, scholars involved with the architecture and fine arts of the Muslim courts of Northern India and the Deccan regard contemporary practice in the Hindu courts of Southern India to fall outside their area of interest. In this way, the architecture and art of the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods are situated between two well-defined disciplines, lacking any credibility as a valid subject in their own right.

But there are other, less tangible reasons why this particular tradition has failed to command notice. Historians of Indian art generally express a preference for earlier phases, especially in their search for the origins of architectural forms and iconic motifs. The prejudice against what is perceived as 'late' is intensified when it comes to 'Hindu' architecture and sculpture. Most scholars who have considered the architecture and art of Southern India have been reluctant to advance beyond the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a time which coincided with the finest achievements of the Hoysalas and Cholas. Underlying this oversight is an assumption that Vijayanagara and Nayaka monuments and art works are unworthy of study. The hidden argument seems to focus on what are perceived as repetitive and derivative modes of production which are only too readily interpreted as mechanical and, therefore, devoid of artistic inspiration. Such assumptions accord with widely held theories of style, in which 'later' periods are judged as inferior in quality. However, as studies of 'late' phases in other art historical contexts have demonstrated, suppositions about stylistic 'decline' cannot usually be sustained.

It is worth pointing out that this art historical prejudice against the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods has not always existed. One of the first champions of Indian architecture, James Fergusson, wrote perceptively about later Southern Indian styles. The measured plans that he published of the religious complexes at Srirangam and Rameswaram, for instance, are still the only ones available. Robert Fellowes Chisholm, another early pioneer, made detailed surveys of the palaces at Chandragiri and Madurai, personally supervising restoration work. As for sculpture, only in general studies of iconic forms, such as that of Gopinatha Rao, is any number of stone and metal images from these later centuries included.

Several unavoidable obstacles inherent in the subject account for the continuing reluctance of scholars to tackle the art traditions of this era. With a



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few exceptions, the major temples of the era lack specialised monographs to provide complete transcripts of epigraphical records, illustrations of architecture and sculpture, and accurate drawings of overall layouts. Among those monuments that have recently been covered are the Rama temple at Vijayanagara, documented by an international team of scholars, including the present author, and the Arunachaleshvara temple at Tiruvannamalai, published by members of the Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient at Pondicherry. Many other shrines of equal historic and artistic interest await serious attention. One factor that has proved a deterrent to most researchers is the sheer scale of temple complexes and the profusion of carvings and paintings. Another obstacle has been the ongoing modification of religious structures, a process that has concealed and even destroyed original sculptures and paintings. The fact that many of these are 'living temples', crowded with priests and worshippers engaged in daily celebrations, may have further discouraged documentation work.

The linguistic capabilities required for this subject are demanding, and a knowledge of no less than three Southern Indian languages is essential. Only a small fraction of the thousands of epigraphs available for the monuments have been translated; many are not even adequately published in indigenous languages. Cycles of narrative paintings, both on temple ceilings and on cloth hangings, are often supplied with labels identifying the principal scenes and characters; such annotations await transcription and translation.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The chronological dimensions of Southern India relevant to this investigation have already been outlined, but the relevant geographical parameters need also to be clarified from the outset. The region under consideration encompasses all of the Subcontinental peninsula south of the Krishna River, from the uplands of the Deccan plateau to Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin) (see Maps, pp. xxii–xxiii). This territory almost exactly coincides with the greatest extent of the Vijayanagara empire in the middle of the sixteenth century, being no less than 800 kilometres from north to south, and 600 kilometres from east to west.

The region embraces four major linguistic groups: the southern portions of the Kannada and Telugu zones, broadly corresponding with parts of the modern states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, respectively, and all of the Tamil and Malayalam zones, which comprise the modern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. These different zones are distinguished here by their respective languages, but they are by no means homogeneous; certain tracts of Southern India are bilingual today as they were in the past. There is no clear boundary between the Kannada and Telugu zones which, instead, merge imperceptibly in the Deccan plains. These two zones are often treated together in this study,



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particularly in the discussion of temple architecture. The demarcation of the Telugu and Tamil zones is more problematic since these two languages have profoundly intermingled over the centuries. Tamil inscriptions cover monuments in the southern part of the Telugu zone; Telugu labels accompany paintings on temples in many parts of the Tamil zone.

Not quite all of Southern India is covered by this study. The Arabian Sea littoral never came entirely within the orbit of the Vijayanagara empire or the Nayaka kingdoms. This is explained by the geographical isolation of the coastal strip, much of which is cut off from the remainder of the peninsula by the steeply wooded hills of the Western Ghats. The Malayalam zone of Kerala enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy throughout these centuries, benefiting from lucrative ocean trade with Arabs, later with Europeans. The architecture and art of this region are correspondingly independent, exhibiting only occasional connections with developments elsewhere in Southern India; for this reason they are referred to only incidentally. A quite different situation exists for the coastal strip further north. Known as Kanara, this part of the Kannada zone was one of the richest provinces of the Vijayanagara empire; its architecture and art form an important part of this study.

Limitations other than geographical ones are also incorporated here. Certain categories of data, for example, have had to be excluded, including buildings in non-indigenous, intrusive styles. Mosques and tombs erected by the Sultans of Madurai in the southernmost part of the Tamil zone during the course of the fourteenth century do not appear. Neither do the monuments constructed by the Nawabs of Arcot in the northern part of the Tamil zone and by the Muslim usurpers of the Mysore throne in the Kannada zone, all of which postdate the middle of the eighteenth century. Christian architecture is also omitted. In spite of the long-standing tradition of church building in the area, going back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in both the Tamil and Malayalam zones, most surviving examples were extensively remodelled in later times. Some churches have elaborately carved wooden altarpieces that imitate Iberian Baroque models of the era.

The cutoff date adopted here has necessitated the exclusion of a number of categories of Southern Indian painting. Portable panels depicting mythological subjects executed in styles associated with the schools of Mysore and Thanjavur cannot be dated prior to the end of the eighteenth century and are, therefore, not included. Ceiling panels in temples at Sibi and Holalagundi, and murals in the Jain monastery at Sravana Belgola are similarly late in date and have not been included. Paintings on cotton intended for European or South-East Asian clients fall outside the confines of this study. Huge quantities of such textiles were exported in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from ports on the Bay of Bengal seaboard, better known to the Europeans as the Coromandel coast.



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## PLAN OF THE STUDY

In spite of such limitations of data, the volume makes some claim to completeness since it deals with the broadest possible range of monuments and art objects. The overall scarcity of documentation for buildings, sculptures and paintings in Southern India during these centuries suggests the suitability of an overall descriptive approach, with comprehensive chapters focusing on the most important examples.

Chapter 2 sets these varied materials within an appropriate chronological framework by outlining the overall historical trends of the Vijayanagara and Nayaka periods. Acknowledging the break with pre-Vijayanagara traditions, the chapter presents a straightforward approach to the rise and fall of the principal ruling dynasties of Southern India. A complex hierarchy of rulers emerges as a characteristic feature of the era. Many of the royal personalities mentioned in this discussion take on importance as patrons of architecture and art works.

Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to temple architecture in Southern India; even so, they describe only a handful of the very large number of religious monuments that survives from this era. The chapters distinguish temples in the Kannada and Telugu zones from those in the Tamil zone. This separation is partly justified by geographic and historic considerations; the presence of local building traditions further underscores this separation of material. Both chapters treat the temples chronologically, beginning with the relatively modest projects of the Vijayanagara era and concluding with the ambitious complexes of the Nayakas and their subordinates. The overall growth in scale and elaboration in these centuries was only possible by sustained investment in religious architecture, a process that is particularly noticeable in the Tamil zone.

Military and royal constructions, particularly forts and palaces, form the subject of Chapter 5. Unfortunately, only isolated examples are available for study, and these are either incomplete and ruined or much altered by restoration. The chapter directs attention to the formal and technical features derived from the architecture of the Sultanate kingdoms of the Deccan. The synthesis of styles that characterises palace architecture at Vijayanagara is proposed as a major artistic achievement. The 'Islamic' appearance of these royal structures is shown to be deceptive, since all of these pavilions, watchtowers, bath-houses and stables are entirely original in design. The integration of different building types and decorative features testifies to the invention of the Vijayanagara architects.

Almost all known stone and metal sculptures from these centuries were intended for religious settings; but this does not mean that they were necessarily restricted to depictions of gods and goddesses. Chapter 6 describes



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the principal divinities in Southern Indian sculptures, as well as a host of accessory figures, from saints, ascetics and saviours to armed guardians and seductive maidens. Narration is a significant component, with carved reliefs illustrating legendary episodes. Royal themes are accorded a special importance. The development of portraiture, in which rulers and their families are shown in devotional attitudes, is an outstanding innovation of the era. Another contribution of temple sculpture in these centuries is the emphasis on martial themes, nowhere better illustrated than in the mounted riders and rearing beasts that line halls and corridors. Nor is the chapter limited to large-scale compositions: miniature bronzes and ivory figurines and relief panels are also included; so, too, steel weapons and standards.

Southern India painting in these centuries occurs on plastered ceilings and walls, on cotton scrolls and hangings, and on paper manuscripts and albums. In marked contrast to this diversity of locations and media, there is an overall unity of subject matter, particularly in respect to the choice of sacred topics. Chapter 7 records the appearance of painted mythological scenes in temples and palaces, as well as in a wide range of portable, small-scale items. Like sculpture, narrative art in the religious context is closely linked to local legends. Labels are often employed to identify major episodes and principal figures. Rulers accompanied by women and armed retinues are also depicted in the pictorial art of this era, either on palace walls or on brightly coloured cloth hangings. Like votive portraits installed in temples, these illustrations of royal life are a significant artistic innovation.

Chapter 8, which serves as a conclusion, draws attention to common developments in Southern Indian architecture, sculpture and painting. Three basic stylistic processes are isolated, stressing the tendencies towards revivalism, innovation and integration in architecture and the arts. A number of unifying themes are also pinpointed, especially those contributing towards artistic coherence. The interaction between these stylistic processes and unifying themes is proposed as a determining factor, contributing to the distinctive artistic personality of the age. The chapter ends with an estimate of the legacy of Southern India architecture and art in later times.



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## CHAPTER 2

# HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

The four hundred years or so under review in this volume delimit a remarkable sequence of events: the formation, climax and disintegration of the Vijayanagara empire, and the opportunity that this process gave for lesser kingdoms to achieve independence. The varied careers of the different states of Southern India in this period provide an overall historical framework for the buildings and art works to be discussed in the following chapters. The appropriateness of a dynastic approach is suggested by the many monuments and attendant sculptures and paintings that are directly linked with known reigning figures, their family members, commanders and governors. For this reason dynastic appellations are generally retained, especially for religious and royal monuments. But this should not be taken to mean that artistic developments at this time invariably coincided with dynastic history; considerable difficulties occur when assigning a precise chronology to certain phases of artistic activity, particularly painting and the minor arts.

The history of Southern India from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries is relatively well established and there is little need here to give more than the bare outlines of the major dynasties together with their prominent ruling personalities; even so, it is important to recognise the overall trends of the era. As the centuries progressed, larger states with some measure of political unity tended to collapse, thereby creating opportunities for smaller states to emerge. These smaller kingdoms were generally unable to bond together into larger political units, since they were mostly engaged in territorial conflicts with one another. This pattern of disintegration was repeated at different levels: in the sixteenth century, Vijayanagara fragmented into the smaller Nayaka kingdoms; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was the turn of the Nayaka kingdoms to break apart. These post-Vijayanagara principalities are referred to here as 'successor states'.

This historical situation was complicated by the uneasy relationship that existed throughout much of this era between the rulers of Southern India and the Sultans of the Deccan kingdoms that lay to the north of the Krishna. The strife spanned almost three hundred years and had its consequence in a series of invasions by the forces of the Deccan Sultans, the Marathas and the Mughals. The conflicts that led to these conquests were occasioned by expansionist policies, almost never by differences in religion. The prolonged duration of these troubles gave ample opportunity for social and cultural interchanges between Southern India and the Deccan which were to have



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significant repercussions in architecture and the arts. This is most strikingly illustrated in the syncretistic style adopted for courtly monuments at the various capitals of the Vijayanagara and Nayaka rulers (see Chapter 5). An additional factor affecting historical trends in this era was the arrival of European traders in Southern India during the course of the sixteenth century. In spite of the decided impact that these foreigners had on economic life in the region, there is little evidence of artistic influence other than in objects specifically manufactured for export, such as cotton textiles.

## POWER AND PATRONAGE

In the discussion that follows there is a repeated use of the terms 'empire' and 'kingdom'; these require some explanation. An analysis of the historical conditions that pertain to Southern India in these centuries reveals a limited degree of political cohesion. Only rarely did rulers enjoy complete and total control over their territories; usually they were challenged by their governors and commanders who made repeated and sometimes successful bids for autonomy. Southern Indian states were not, therefore, truly unified kingdoms with effective centralised commands. Some historians, notably Burton Stein, have argued that they were little more than composite states with no overall bureaucratic or administrative organisation. Stein believes that political coherence relied upon complementary sets of relationships between rulers and their representatives. According to the 'segmentary' view that he proposes, Vijayanagara, the greatest of all Southern Indian empires, should not be understood as monolithic. Rather, it was a complex polity based upon a balance of forces, often more precarious than stable, between the Vijayanagara emperors at the capital and their representatives at the provincial centres. Some viceroys were in fact directly related to the rulers themselves, often being younger members of the royal household, an important factor in the attempts of the Vijayanagara emperors to disperse their influence over large tracts of territory.

The Vijayanagara state incorporated a wide spectrum of local chiefs and warriors, especially in more remote and less populated districts. Their position was based partly on the authority invested in them by the emperors; in turn, the Vijayanagara monarchs often relied upon the financial and military support from these lesser figures, who were expected to remit taxes and to contribute arms, troops and war-animals on demand. This mutual dependency of rulers and their subordinates is an outstanding historical feature of the era, replicated in all of the successor states. In spite of the reduction in scale and resources of these later kingdoms, they too were based on the same reciprocal networks and interrelationships.

This widespread distribution of power is of particular consequence for the



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development of the arts during this era. Such circumstances encouraged individuals at different levels to give visible form to their political ambitions by acting as artistic patrons. The profusion of building projects sponsored by emperors and kings, as well as their ministers, governors and commanders, may be interpreted within a wider political context as acts intended to reinforce claims to authority. In this respect, patronage of the arts mirrored the wide spectrum of contemporary power affiliations. This is particularly true of monumental architecture in the religious context, an obvious venue for conspicuous displays of might and wealth. Nowhere is this better shown than at the Vijayanagara capital where schemes sponsored by the Vijayanagara emperors were improved and amplified by powerful individuals, especially ministers and commanders (see Chapter 3).

Since building construction was a permanent demonstration of strength and resources, lesser figures did not hesitate to express their political aspirations by erecting shrines and temples that approached, and sometimes even rivalled in scale and splendour, those of greater personalities. In exactly this way, Govinda Dikshita, chief minister of the Thanjavur rulers in the second half of the sixteenth century, came to erect grander temples than those sponsored by the Nayakas themselves (see Chapter 4). Sculptures and painting also served to establish a political presence by means of a specific imagery intended to represent the patron and his family. The gallery of carved figures at Madurai serves as dynastic history of the Nayakas, presided over by Tirumala, sponsor of the whole project (see Chapter 6). Painted compositions on ceilings and walls provided yet other means of portraying powerful individuals, generally in the presence of temple deities (see Chapter 7).

## FOUNDATION OF EMPIRE

The era under consideration opens with an unprecedented calamity for Southern India: the invasion of the region at the turn of the fourteenth century by Malik Kafur, general of Alauddin, Sultan of Delhi. Malik Kafur's forces brought to an abrupt end all of the indigenous ruling houses of Southern India, not one of which was able to withstand the assault or outlive the conquest. Virtually every city of importance in the Kannada, Telugu and Tamil zones succumbed to the raids of Malik Kafur; forts were destroyed, palaces dismantled and temple sanctuaries wrecked in the search for treasure. In order to consolidate the rapidly won gains of this pillage, Malik Kafur established himself in 1323 at Madurai (Madura) in the southernmost part of the Tamil zone, former capital of the Pandyas who were dislodged by the Delhi forces. Madurai thereupon became the capital of the Ma'bar (Malabar) province of the Delhi empire.

Soon after, in 1334, troubles compelled the Delhi ruler, Muhammad



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Tughluq, to recall the army from Southern India to assist in wars elsewhere. The results were twofold: the governor of Madurai proclaimed himself ruler of an independent Sultanate, while the remainder of Southern India was plunged into what was, in effect, a power vacuum. Such circumstances offered a unique moment for local figures to seize power, as was demonstrated by the sudden appearance of the five Sangama brothers. The origins of the Sangamas has long been debated. Recent research suggests that they may have been officers in the service of Kampila, a chief who controlled a sparsely populated domain in the Kannada-Telugu country in the heart of the Deccan, and who was killed in 1327 in the struggles with the invaders. Kampila's fortified citadel was located in the granite hills a short distance to the north of the sacred site of Hampi on the Tungabhadra River.

Under the skilled leadership of two of the five brothers, Harihara I (1336–54) and Bukka I (1354–77), the Sangamas rapidly established themselves as the most powerful figures in Southern India. Their headquarters were at Hampi, which they transformed into Vijayanagara, City of Victory, the greatest of all fortified citadels in this era (see Chapter 5). The appropriateness of this name for the new capital soon became evident as the Sangamas extended their authority beyond the immediate confines of the Tungabhadra valley into the southern areas of the Kannada and Telugu zones. Among their first acts was to visit the monastery at Sringeri, a monastic site in the forested hills south-west of their capital, where they sought the support of Vidyaranya, the local pontiff. Under Harihara II (1377–1404), the Sangama territories were further enlarged to encompass much of the Tamil region and even portions of the Arabian Sea coastal strip, thereby bringing a substantial part of Southern India under the control of Vijayanagara.

The campaigns in the Tamil zone, which from 1358 onwards were led by Kumara Kampana, son of Bukka, culminated in the expulsion of the Madurai king in 1371. The Sultanate threat to the Sangamas was, however, by no means at an end since by this time the Bahmani state had been founded with its capital at Gulbarga, about 250 kilometres north of the Tungabhadra. Disagreements over the control of the fertile lands that lay between the Bahmani and Vijayanagara centres led to a series of wars that was to engage the attentions of the Sangamas from this time onwards. Further threats to their authority came from rival Southern Indian leaders, many of whom had to be forcibly persuaded to acknowledge Sangama supremacy. In spite of these assaults, the Vijayanagara state assumed imperial proportions, and the Sangamas responded by adopting the title of Raya, or emperor. Political and cultural life continued to be focused on the Vijayanagara capital.

The exceptional political success of the Sangamas was due not only to the sheer strength of their forces but also to their ability to adapt to new military techniques, such as those introduced into Southern India by the Delhi army.



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