

*Travel and Ethnology
in the Renaissance*

*South India through European
Eyes, 1250–1625*

JOAN-PAU RUBIÉS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

© Cambridge University Press 2000

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Times 10/12 pt 3B2 system [CE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 77055 6 hardback

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page	viii
<i>Preface</i>		x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>		xx
<i>A note on spelling and vocabulary</i>		xxii
1	In search of India: the empire of Vijayanagara through European eyes	1
2	Marco Polo's India and the Latin Christian tradition	35
3	Establishing lay science: the merchant and the humanist	85
4	Ludovico de Varthema: the curious traveller at the time of Vasco da Gama and Columbus	125
5	The Portuguese and Vijayanagara: politics, religion and classification	164
6	The practice of ethnography: Indian customs and castes	201
7	The social and political order: Vijayanagara decoded	223
8	The historical dimension: from native traditions to European orientalism	251
9	The missionary discovery of South Indian religion: opening the doors of idolatry	308
10	From humanism to scepticism: the independent traveller in the seventeenth century	349
	Conclusion: Before orientalism	388
	<i>Appendix</i>	399
	<i>Bibliography</i>	401
	<i>Index</i>	423

Illustrations

PLATES

- 1 *Mappa mundi* of 1457, called ‘Genoese’. Reproduced with kind permission of the National Library of Florence, *Ministerio per i Beni e le Attività culturali* (ms. Portolano n.1). page 94
- 2 India in the ‘Genoese’ *mappa mundi* of 1457. Reproduced with kind permission of the National Library of Florence. 95
- 3 The idol in the chapel of the king of Calicut. Woodcut by Augsburg artist Jorg Breu in the first German edition of Varthema’s *Die ritterlich von lobwirdig rayss des gestrengen* . . . (Augsburg, 1515). 160
- 4 The brahmins of Calicut worshipping their idol. Woodcut by Augsburg artist Jorg Breu in the first German edition of Varthema’s *Die ritterlich von lobwirdig rayss des gestrengen* . . . (Augsburg, 1515). 161
- 5 Sasivikallu Ganesa statue from Hampi, Vijayanagara. Photograph by the author (1989). 226
- 6 Pampapati temple at Hampi, as seen from the south. Photograph by the author (1989). 227
- 7 Stone reliefs from the southern side of the Hazara Rama temple at Vijayanagara. Photograph by the author (1989). 231
- 8 Mahanavami platform in the royal enclosure of Vijayanagara. Photograph by the author (1989). 245
- 9 Detail of India (including Besinagar) from a map by Jacopo Gastaldi for the first volume of Ramusio’s *Navigazioni e viaggi* (2nd edn, 1554). Reproduced with the kind permission of the University of Reading Library. 302
- 10 Title page of the French edition of Abraham Rogerius’ treatise, *La porte ouverte pour parvenir à la connoissance du paganisme*

- caché* (Amsterdam, 1670). Reproduced with the kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. 310
- 11 Pietro della Valle meets the queen of Olala, from the German edition of his letters, *Reiss-Beschreibung in unterschiedliche theile der welt* (Geneva, 1674). Reproduced with the kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library. 364
- 12 *A sati*, from *Voyages de François Bernier . . . contenant la description des Etats du Grand Mogol*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1709). Reproduced with the kind permission of the University of Reading Library. 369

MAPS

- 1 Vijayanagara 12
- 2 Pietro della Valle's journey to Ikkeri and Olala 360

1. *In search of India: the empire of Vijayanagara through European eyes*

THE PROBLEM OF INDIAN CIVILIZATION IN RENAISSANCE EUROPE: A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW

The India made famous by seventeenth-century European travellers and which occupied an increasingly prominent space in the exotic imagination of the Enlightenment was essentially the India of the Muslim-dominated Mughal empire, with its syncretic court splendour and treacherous imperial politics set against the background of a brahmin-dominated society of naked ascetics, idolatrous temples and inflexible caste rules.¹ Although Akbar's empire was first described in detail by Jesuit missionaries in the 1580s, the Mughal theme effectively belongs to a number of well-educated travellers of the seventeenth century. Some worked for the English or Dutch East India companies, although the majority were largely independent observers, mostly French. Their accounts can be conventionally classified as belonging to the post-Renaissance, a period when these travellers could work from a sophisticated understanding of the difference between the analysis of religious diversity and the analysis of diversity in forms of civilization. This is perhaps the key distinction which characterized early modern ethnology. Our question here will not be what these independent and curious travellers saw and wrote, but rather how they came to be able to describe non-European societies as they did in the light of the ethnological practices of the preceding centuries.

¹ For a general discussion of the eighteenth-century view of Asia see S. Murr, 'Les conditions d'émergence du discours sur l'Inde au siècle des Lumières', in *Inde et littératures* (Paris, 1983), pp. 233–84. Specifically dealing with British perceptions of Asia, see the detailed study by P. Marshall and G. Williams, *The great map of mankind. British perceptions of the world in the age of Enlightenment* (London, 1982), especially chaps. 4 and 5.

The most sophisticated European writers in the East in the sixteenth century were often Jesuit missionaries, and it is precisely when read against the images which they created that the post-Renaissance lay discourse becomes most meaningful. The importance of the Jesuits in the early history of orientalism is therefore enormous. However, they must be analysed as participating in a specialized clerical discourse, one which to some extent they shared with other religious orders. The Portuguese Fróis in Japan, the Catalan Monserrate in Mughal India, and the Italian Ricci in China – to mention three outstanding early writers – were the privileged observers of new areas of Jesuit activity, but their very condition as missionaries also limited their attitudes towards foreign cultures, however much they knew about Strabo or Aristotle and despite the fact that they learned languages which gave them access to indigenous literary traditions. It is in fact necessary to retrieve the attitudes which preceded this Counter-Reformation discourse, and this requires discussing an earlier phase in the production of travel descriptions – those written by laymen with a limited access to the authoritative languages of law and theology which only a university education could secure.

The importance of the travel literature which grew during the first half of the sixteenth century is not simply that it gave Europe many informed descriptions of non-European lands and peoples, but also that it structured the genre on the basis of the practical interests of merchants, soldiers and crown officials. These interests were reflected in the character of the two most comprehensive early Portuguese accounts of the East, the *Suma Oriental* by Tomé Pires (c. 1512) and the *Livro* of Duarte Barbosa (c. 1516). They took the form of geographical treatises that followed trade routes along the coasts of the Indian Ocean, displaying both economic and ethnological information. Remarkably full and systematic, they superseded an earlier genre, the many letters and ‘relations’ that had been composed following the first voyages to India and the New World, and which had been read not only in Lisbon and Seville, but also in distant commercial centres such as Florence, Venice and Nuremberg (often the letters were written by foreign merchants who in fact played an important role in these early expeditions). A few of these early accounts were published, the most important collection of this kind being the *Paesi novamenti ritrovati* which first appeared in Vicenza in 1507, apparently edited by the humanist scholar Francanzano da Montalboddo. It is interesting, however, that the much more detailed descriptions by Barbosa and Pires only circulated in manuscript form and were difficult to consult until they were assembled by the Venetian civil servant Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485–1557) in

the three volumes of his ambitious collection *Delle navigationi et viaggi* (1550–9).²

Ramusio's edition was important both for the quantity and the quality of the material which it contained, and is the logical starting point for any analysis of early sixteenth-century interpretations of Indian civilization. This raises the question of why a collection of similar characteristics was not produced in Portugal in the first place. First of all, it must be borne in mind that the practice of collecting accounts about the new discoveries had been continuous throughout the first half of the century, so that through the hands of Germans and Italians based in Lisbon or Seville much material had made its way into the manuscript collections of the Florentine Piero Vaglianti, the Venetian Alessandro Zorzi or the Augsburg humanist Conrad Peutinger.³ The fact that much unpublished material circulated makes the publication of the earlier major travel collections in Italy and Germany unsurprising. In this context, some historians have explained the limited initial circulation of accounts such as those by Barbosa and Pires as a result of the attempt by the Portuguese crown to prevent rival powers from having access to navigational and geographical information. The success of this policy – to the extent that it existed – was only relative, since as early as 1524 the book of Duarte Barbosa was available for translation into Castilian for Charles V (in his struggle against King John III of Portugal to claim the Spice Islands for his Spanish subjects).⁴ While it seems likely that these

² G. B. Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi*, ed. by M. Milanesi, 6 vols. (Turin, 1978–88), vol. II, pp. 541–780. Milanesi publishes the complete collection as it appeared in 1606. However, the three original volumes of Ramusio's collection were published in 1550 (vol. I), 1556 (vol. III) and 1559 (vol. II). There had been a second edition of the first volume in 1554, with additions by Ramusio, who died in 1557 (the 'second' volume, although finished in 1553, was published posthumously). The editions of 1563, 1574 and 1606 contained further additions, some of which (like Cesare Federici's narrative, only written in 1587) Ramusio could not have planned. In his edition of 1551, Ramusio only published a fragment of Pires' work, missing some of the more original parts. He did not even know its authorship.

³ Piero Vaglianti's collection is now in the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence (ms. 1,910). The Venetian Alessandro Zorzi's more important manuscripts are in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze (B.R. 233). Peutinger's Augsburg collection was dependent on the materials sent to him by Valentim Fernandes, a Moravian publisher settled in Lisbon and deeply involved in the early circulation of information concerning the Portuguese discoveries. See especially B. Greiff, *Tagebuch des Lucas Rem aus den Jahren 1494–1541* (Augsburg, 1861), and Valentim Fernandes, *O Manuscrito 'Valentim Fernandes'* ed. by A. Bião (Lisbon, 1940). A number of early letters by Florentine merchants in India have been recently collected by Marco Spallanzani, *Mercanti fiorentini nell'Asia portoghese* (Florence, 1997).

⁴ For Barbosa's manuscript circulation and translation see D. F. Lach, *Asia in the making of Europe*, vol. I, p. 186, which must be complemented by G. Schurhammer, *Gesammelte Studien*, 4 vols. (Lisbon and Rome, 1965), vol. II, pp. 23–5. The Spanish translation was completed in Vitoria by the Genoese ambassador Martín Centurión with the help of

books were indeed not meant for a general public, probably the lack of a sufficient publishing infrastructure and book market in Portugal was as important as any attempt to prevent valuable information from leaking into foreign hands.⁵ In any case it was difficult to prevent the Venetians, those most affected by the diversion of the spice trade through the new Atlantic route, from sending agents to collect information in Lisbon, or even interviewing in their own city independent travellers like the Italian adventurer Ludovico de Varthema or the Castilian Jew Francisco de Albuquerque.⁶

Ramusio's collection represents the application of humanist methods of faithful documentary edition and humanist ideals of systematic geographical reconstruction to the interests of Venetian commercial imperialism. Different principles, albeit no less imperialistic, dominated the public production of images of the East in Portugal. It was not until the second half of the sixteenth century that major narratives about India

Diogo Ribeiro, the Portuguese cosmographer now in the service of Charles V, to prepare for the Badajoz-Elvas junta of 1524 (the main manuscript is in Barcelona, but there are others in Madrid and Munich). It was also used for Ribeiro's important world maps of 1527 and 1529, which insisted on giving the Moluccas to Spain. It is likely that Charles secured the copy through Diogo Ribeiro himself or through any other of the various Portuguese sailors and cosmographers who abandoned King Manuel during these years seeking better prospects in Castile.

⁵ In his analysis, Lach repeatedly puts forward the traditional argument for a Portuguese 'control of information'. See Lach, *Asia*, vol. I, pp. 151–4. The view has received much criticism. It seems difficult to prove that there was a systematic attempt to prevent *any* information about the new lands to 'leak' into the hands of foreign competitors, but there is little doubt that, at least in the sixteenth-century Iberian Peninsula, governments organized their own sources of information relating to colonies as a matter of state. A selective process concerning what kind of information was made available was part of the business of running an overseas empire, and the fierce competition between Portugal and Castile over the Spice Islands, for instance, certainly advised some control in the early decades of the sixteenth century. It is also true that Portuguese writers found it difficult to publish in their own country (such was the case of Mendes Pinto), and that many important chronicles, for instance the *Lendas da Índia* by Gaspar Correa and parts of Diogo do Couto's *Decadas*, were not published. Sometimes influential noblemen who did not wish the revelation of details which diminished their prestige conspired against certain chroniclers and forced revisions or even interrupted projects.

⁶ For Albuquerque, see R. Cessi (ed.) 'L'itinerario indiano di Francesco dal Bocchier', *Atti della Accademia nazionale dei Lincei. Rendiconti della classe di scienze morali, storiche e filologiche*, ser. VIII, 6 (1951): 232–49, and J. Aubin, 'Francisco de Albuquerque, un juif castillan au service de l'Inde Portugaise (1510–15)', *Arquivos do Centro Cultural Português*, 7 (1973): 175–88. Cessi wrongly assumed that the author of the report was a Venetian merchant. The correct identification is given by Jean Aubin, who offers an interesting biographical sketch. Albuquerque was apparently a Jewish merchant from the kingdom of Castile who travelled to India from Cairo but was then enslaved by the Portuguese (1510) and became one of Governor Affonso d'Albuquerque's informants and interpreters. His new name was the result of conversion to Christianity in 1511, but apparently on his return to Cairo he recovered his original faith. See Braz de Albuquerque, *Comentários de Affonso d'Albuquerque*, ed. by A. Bião, 2 vols. (Coimbra, 1922–3), vol. II, p. 454, and (more precisely) Aubin, 'Francisco de Albuquerque', 182–4.

came to light, namely the chronicles of the Portuguese expansion written by Fernão Lopes de Castanheda (1551–61), João de Barros (1552–1615) and Braz de Albuquerque (1557).⁷ These chroniclers, in their efforts to summarize their information, tried to synthesize ethnographical observations in short descriptive chapters, in this way making available evaluative generalizations about the oriental Indians to the European public. Although some chroniclers like Castanheda could claim a direct and long personal experience of the East, generally speaking these narratives could only give a limited role to first-hand ethnographical descriptions, because they were ruled by the aims and conventions of the epic genre.⁸ There was certainly room for a degree of antiquarian curiosity within the well-written and remarkably informed narrative by the humanist court historian and bureaucrat Barros, but his *Ásia* was nevertheless dominated by a very medieval-looking synthesis between patriotic aims and chivalric ideals.

The material collected by Ramusio and the Portuguese chronicles thus offered distinct images of India for European readers, but rarely attempted to define Indian civilization – a reflection of the problems of developing a lay discourse on cultural diversity outside limited practical concerns. In fact the first attempt to define Indian civilization from a comparative perspective and on the basis of personal experience was the result of the development of Christian missions in the East. Alessandro Valignano (Chieti 1539 – Macao 1606), the Jesuit Visitor to the province of India between 1574 and 1606, wrote extensively about Asian lands and peoples in the different *Summaria* which he sent to the General of the Society in Rome. His three reports became the basis for a more ambitious historical narrative written in Castilian, the *Historia del principio y progreso de la Compañía de Jesús en las Indias Orientales*, the first part of which was sent to Europe in 1584. This work influenced Jesuit historians like Giovan Pietro Maffei, who provided Europe with authoritative descriptions of the East in the late sixteenth century. Besides its focus on

⁷ These chroniclers were followed by the historians of the reign of Manuel I, Damião de Góis and Jerónimo Osório, whose accounts of Asia were largely derivative, although not without merit. It should be noted that the work of Braz de Albuquerque has a distinctive structure. It is not a general chronicle, but it focuses on the deeds of his natural father, the famous governor Affonso de Albuquerque – hence the classical form of *commentaries* (although not written by Affonso himself, the narrative was mainly based on his papers). Braz, whose mother was a morisco slave, shared the peculiar destiny of Hernando Colón (1488–1539) of having to promote his personal cause by becoming the historian of a distinguished but ill-starred natural father.

⁸ On the Portuguese chroniclers see J. B. Harrison, 'Five Portuguese historians', in C. H. Phillips (ed.) *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon* (London, 1961); C. R. Boxer, *João de Barros, Portuguese humanist and historian of Asia* (New Delhi, 1981); Lach, *Asia*, vol. I, pp. 187–92.

the sanctification of Francis Xavier and in all Jesuit activities, the main interest of the *Historia* lay in the chapters describing the 'qualities' and 'customs' of the oriental Indians, the Japanese and the inhabitants of the kingdom of China.⁹ Although Valignano is better known for his importance in re-shaping the Jesuit missions than for his intellectual legacy, his writings can be seen as an important landmark in the sixteenth-century European discourse on the Orient. They provided a sophisticated framework for the comparison of different peoples under the concept of rational behaviour, enshrining an idea of civility (not yet 'civilization') which was nevertheless combined with racial and religious forms of classification.

In this sense his reports, informed by a privileged education in law and theology, can be seen to express an original development that went beyond the impressive collection of travel narratives published by Ramusio a few decades earlier. While Ramusio's work had consolidated a powerful model of a world-wide empirical geography based on eyewitness accounts which benefited from humanist philological methods and thus superseded Ptolemy, Valignano and his fellow Jesuits carried European views of non-Europeans to a new natural and historical order which was in fact a meeting point between practical and theological concerns. These writings therefore represent the achievements and, at the same time, contradictions of Renaissance ethnology, and can be usefully taken as a point from which to obtain a perspective on both previous and later developments.

Perhaps the most important question is the place of India in this cultural process. It is significant that as late as 1574 European observers, having had a long history of contact with the Indian subcontinent and its peoples, acknowledged the difficulty of providing a unified image of India that made sense of its diversity. Valignano, aware of this problem, preferred to limit his observations to the western coast 'running from the city of Diu to Cape Comorin'.¹⁰ This was, of course, the area where the Portuguese were able to exercise some direct political and religious influence by means of a regular military pressure – a long strip of land,

⁹ See Alessandro Valignano, *Historia del principio y progreso de la Compañía de Jesús en las Indias Orientales 1542–64*, ed. by J. Wicki (Rome, 1944), chaps. 4 (pp. 22–40), 17 (pp. 126–63) and 26–27 (pp. 214–56). For a general view, see Lach, *Asia*, vol. I, pp. 257ff. A more detailed study of Valignano's policies in Japan, his key area of activity, is to be found in the introduction by J. L. Alvarez-Taladriz to Alessandro Valignano, *Sumario de las cosas del Japón*, ed. by J. L. Alvarez-Taladriz (Tokyo, 1954); J. F. Schütte, *Valignano's mission principles for Japan*, 2 vols. (Institute for Jesuit Sources, St Louis, 1980–5), and J. F. Moran, *The Japanese and the Jesuits: Alessandro Valignano in sixteenth-century Japan* (London, 1993).

¹⁰ Valignano, *Historia*, p. 22. This corresponds to the coastline of the modern states of Gujarat, Maharastra, Karnataka, Goa and Kerala.

separated from the interior by a chain of mountains, where the Europeans had set up their earliest commercial factories and forts and a few important settlements, including the capital Goa. And yet within this limited area the difficulty of drawing a distinct image of India and its peoples was solved by recourse to a contemptuous generalization. Valignano ruthlessly described the Indian gentiles ‘of many nations and languages’ as inferior to Europeans: ‘These people, who are almost black and go half naked, are universally contemptible and held to be base by the Portuguese and other Europeans; and the truth is that compared to them they are of little substance and lack refinement. They are, as Aristotle says, of a servile nature, because they are commonly poor, miserable and mean, and for any gain they will do the lowest things’.¹¹ He went on to explain that avaricious kings and lords exploited the lower castes without conscience and only kept peace and justice in order better to exploit them, that their elevated concept of *honra* and politeness did not prevent a vicious licentiousness towards women, and that the caste system was in fact an expression of tyranny and superstition. As for their religion, he noted that it contained a core of theological truth to which they added ‘many chimeras and monstrosities’.¹² In conclusion, in Valignano’s hierarchy of civilizations the dark-skinned Indians occupied a position slightly superior to the black Africans, since they were not entirely without reason, but were of a lower nature than the Europeans and other white peoples.¹³

The negative bias that pervades this description cannot be analysed simply as a personal opinion, even though Valignano’s condition as the son of a Neapolitan aristocrat certainly contributed to the formation of his attitudes, while his education at the university of Padua helped him develop a theoretical explanation based on Aristotle. The important contrast is that in the same period a more limited contact with the Chinese or the Japanese offered to the educated missionaries led by the same Valignano not only an apparently homogeneous image of a different people with particular customs, qualities and institutions (what we would now call a different ‘culture’ or ‘civilization’), but also higher hopes for evangelization and even a feeling of genuine admiration for their civil achievements. The non-European could actually be perceived

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 24–5.

¹² Ibid. pp. 25–32.

¹³ Valignano never explains the exact relationship between his Aristotelian concept of nature, his racial classification and his cultural classification. It seems, however, apparent that he thought that cultural differences responded to natural, not simply accidental, differences, so that the Indians were not likely to become as capable Christians as the Japanese. Furthermore, colour was also an expression of these natural differences: the more vile Indians were, the more logical it appeared to him that they were also black.

as superior in the pursuit of an ideal of a well-organized society, a superiority measured by justice, education and prosperity.¹⁴

Valignano's views were expressed with particular clarity and forcefulness, but they do not contradict the opinions found in contemporary writers, especially among missionaries. Why were the Indians made to play such a negative role in the first clearly formulated Renaissance interpretations of Asian peoples? The answer lies partly in the very frustration of the European Catholics in their attempts to evangelize the Hindus (Muslims were from the beginning effectively regarded as a hopeless enemy). The evangelization of the gentiles, in contrast to war against the 'Moors', was more than an initial strategy to justify taking away the valuable Asiatic trade from the hands of existing merchant communities: it was an ideological imperative that went deep into Hispanic traditions of conquest and crusade. Its meaning in terms of practical needs (such as the search for indigenous allies) cannot be dissociated with the idealism that allowed the Portuguese crown to keep the empire together despite centrifugal forces and to justify it in Europe. A success so limited that in many ways amounted to failure was an important problem for European identity, especially for the missionaries themselves. For example, their greatest success in India was among the low-caste Paravas of the Fishery coast – the kind of ignorant and miserable people which Valignano despised.¹⁵ It was largely the Jesuits' concern with the quality of their converts in India that prompted them to place hopes in other lands.

This process can already be observed in the letters of Francis Xavier (1506–52), which were read by all his followers and inspired their first ideas on the Asians. He would preach to the poor Indians of the Fishery

¹⁴ The Chinese were the main focus of this idealization – the Japanese played a far more ambiguous role. For sixteenth-century European views of China see C. R. Boxer (ed.) *South China in the sixteenth century*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series (London, 1953) and R. d'Intino (ed.) *Enformação das cousas da China. Textos do século XVI* (Lisbon, 1989). See also the recent work by Rui Loureiro, *A China na cultura Portuguesa do século XVI* (forthcoming).

¹⁵ The Paravas were baptized by Franciscans. Their conversion in 1535–6 was apparently their own communal initiative: they sought the protection of the Portuguese fleets against rival native Muslim converts from Kayal who, with the help of Gujarati merchants, threatened their control of the pearl fisheries of the straits of Manaar (see K. McPherson, 'Paravas and Portuguese. A study of Portuguese strategy and its impact on an Indian seafaring community', *Mare Liberum*, 13 (1997): 69–82). For the Portuguese the Tirunelveli coast was of strategic navigational value, and after crushing Muslim shipping they sent the energetic Jesuits to strengthen their indirect control. In the middle of the century the Paravas flocked again to the protection of Portuguese arms against the depredations of Telugu-speaking warriors of northern origin representing the authority of the Vijayanagara captains in the area. By the time of Valignano perhaps as many as 100,000 converts were being looked after by a very small group of Jesuits.

coast, but brahmins were perfidious liars and subtle manipulators of popular ignorance, 'the most perverse people in the world'. His dreams really went towards Japan, 'the best people among the infidels', honour-loving, courteous, monogamous, without idolatry, lettered, rational and desirous to learn. Given that they had their own universities, a missionary with a good theological training would certainly be able to engage in rational disputation and convert the best among them. As it turned out, experience proved things to be more difficult, and in particular the Buddhist bonzes put up a solid intellectual resistance. Undaunted, Xavier left a few men in Japan and tried China instead, where people were generous, understanding of politics, peaceful and extremely scholarly: if they converted, the Japanese would surely follow suit.¹⁶

Valignano was a heir to these images, including the preference for white people as more likely to be rational, but with him a new conception of evangelization clearly emerged too, one based on the idea of adaptation, what might be described as a consciously oriented cultural exchange.¹⁷ It was thus in the more remote China and Japan, rather than in India or south-east Asia, where this new strategy was given stronger support, almost as if Valignano's personal judgement about the inferior civilization of the brahmins directed well-trained missionaries like Matteo Ricci away from the Indian hinterland. It is not entirely coincidental that Roberto de Nobili only started his experimental work in the interior of South India in the seventeenth century, right after Valignano's death. The fact that Nobili's very different attitude towards Indian culture was *also* related to his background as a well-educated Italian aristocrat who had read Aquinas proves (if proof is needed) that the elite culture of Europe was far from rigid and homogeneous, and that social or national background did not determine a specific response to other cultures.

Xavier's and Valignano's prejudice about what they saw as the superstitious ignorance of the Indian gentiles was not inevitable, but generally

¹⁶ All the letters are collected in Francis Xavier, *Epistolae S. Francisci Xavierii*, ed. by G. Schurhammer and J. Wicki, 2 vols. (Rome, 1944–5). See in particular numbers 20, 90, 96, 97, 110 (in the above description of Xavier's view of Japanese qualities I have extracted some of the contents of letter 90, written to the Jesuits in Goa from Kagoshima on 5 November 1549; his views on brahmins can be found in a letter to the brothers in Rome from Cochin on 15 January 1544; his views on China in his letter to Ignatius of Loyola from Cochin on 29 January 1552). The saint's career in India is studied in detail in G. Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: his life, his times*, 4 vols. (Rome, 1977), vol. II: *India 1541–45*.

¹⁷ Background information for this 'new concept of evangelization' in Lach, *Asia*, vol. I, pp. 245–331, and J. D. Spence, *The memory palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York, 1984). See also chapter 9 below.

speaking it was shared by the Portuguese ecclesiastical bodies established in the East. It was a negative judgement of Indian civility based on apparent dissimilarities with Europe, legitimized by the immediate applicability of the concept of idolatry, and compounded by decades of missionary frustration. However, the strength of this attitude was also related to the difficulty of using a simple political image to articulate an understanding of the customs and institutions of the peoples inhabiting India. Less than in Japan, and especially unlike in China, the Europeans in India did not face a unified political system with which they could have economic, military and cultural dealings, but rather a collection of small and often volatile sultanates, principalities and semi-independent city-ports involved in oceanic trade. As Valignano recognized, it was difficult to speak about 'India' in general, because 'taking this name as it is commonly used in Europe, India contains such a great diversity of provinces and kingdoms, that it is not possible to comprehend except for those who have travelled part of them'.¹⁸ For European observers, the fact that many of the more important states were ruled by Muslim elites was less of a problem than the fact that they were so fragmented and unstable, at a time when the ideas of political independence and stability were fundamental to the image of a successful civil life.

Akbar's Mughal empire might be seen as a clear exception, and yet this was a country in the periphery of the European vision, not really hegemonic until the latter decades of the sixteenth century and then still quite remote from Goa. Serious contacts with Akbar's court did not come until the first Jesuit mission, led by Father Rudolf Aquaviva, was sent in 1579, of which the best account is Antonio Monserrate's *Mongolicae legationis commentarius*.¹⁹ The author belonged to a selected group of well-trained Jesuits who had been led by Valignano in 1574 to infuse a new vigour and a new orientation to the missionary path opened by Francis Xavier, despite and beyond the previous efforts of other religious orders.²⁰ Although the *Commentarius* did not reach Europe, Monserrate's briefer 'Relation of Akbar, king of the Mughals', written in 1582 under the illusion that Akbar might convert to Christianity, offered a powerful image of Indian (albeit not Hindu) kingship which was destined to have great impact in Europe, and which contrasts with

¹⁸ Valignano, *Historia*, p. 22.

¹⁹ Antonio Monserrate, 'Mongolicae legationis commentarius', ed. by H. Hosten, *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. III (Calcutta, 1914). There exists an English translation: *The commentary . . . on his journey to the court of Akbar*, translated by J. S. Hoyland and annotated by S. N. Banerjee (Oxford, 1922).

²⁰ During the first century of contacts, the Franciscan and Dominican friars in Portuguese India wrote remarkably little concerning indigenous customs and religion – in stark contrast with those sent by the Spanish to the New World.

Valignano's contemporary statement that indigenous political power was essentially tyrannical.²¹

We may conclude that there was no clear, coherent image of Indian civilization in sixteenth-century Europe – not even a simple, easily recognizable stereotype. The most complete accounts of India did not circulate extensively before 1550, and they seldom had a unitary structure. The European armchair cosmographer of the second half of the sixteenth century needed to piece together the information about India from a variety of sources, often with unhappy results. Only a few coastal areas were reasonably well known – those of Malabar, Kanará, Coromandel and Gujarat – while descriptions of more remote places such as Bengal depended on occasional expeditions.²² The majority of these early writers concentrated their attention on either economic possibilities or on the activities of the Portuguese, although indigenous customs and basic political realities were often described as an important background. The lack of recognizable unified political structures in the Indian subcontinent (before the consolidation of the Mughals in the north) established the general context for the early experience of the Europeans in India, and determined to a great extent their difficulty in obtaining a focused image of Indian civility in a world of not one but many 'others'.

There is, however, an important exception to this, which is provided by the narratives dealing with the empire of Vijayanagara. This Hindu kingdom occupied an area about the size of Britain in the tropical southern tip of the Indian peninsula (see map 1). Narsinga and Bisnagar, the two names by which the kingdom (not without some degree of confusion) was known to Europeans, in fact became important points of reference in the late-Renaissance map of the world. Both for the quality of the sources available and for the historical importance of the 'object' of description it provides, Vijayanagara constitutes a good case-study for the central questions of this book: why did the Europeans in Asia see what they saw? – and, more specifically, how did they perceive and interpret human cultural diversity? It is for this reason that the area occupied by this kingdom will be the focus of my analysis.

²¹ Compare 'Relaçam do Equebar, rei dos mogores' in J. Wicki (ed.) *Documenta indica*, 18 vols. (Rome, 1964–88), vol. XII, pp. 647–61, with Valignano, *Historia*, pp. 25–6. Valignano's description of Hindu kings as tyrannical should not be read in opposition to his understanding of the Muslim sultans of Gujarat and the Deccan, whose tyrannical power was an even more obvious commonplace in the ideology of the 'Estado da India'.

²² For instance, the 1521 expedition published in *Voyage dans les deltas du Gange et de l'Irraouaddy 1521*, ed. by G. Bouchon and L. F. Thomaz (Paris, 1988), with Portuguese text and French and English translations.



Map 1 Vijayanagara (at its maximum extension, occupying the territory south of the Krishna river).

THE LAST HINDU EMPIRE

The history of the independent Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara cannot be understood without reference to the Muslim invasions of the Indian subcontinent which gave the new military state its defensive character. From the end of the twelfth century Muslim armies composed of Turkish and Afghan soldiers invaded India from the north-west. With the military superiority of central-Asian cavalry, they succeeded in the majority of their campaigns, but unlike their predecessor of the first decades of the eleventh century, Mahmud of Ghazni, instead of limiting themselves to regular plunder they settled in Delhi. From there, they soon pushed ahead further south towards the Deccan, attacking the Hindu capitals Devagari in 1294 and Warangal in 1308 and subjecting them to tribute. This new Delhi sultanate was never a very stable political entity, but it ensured the continuous presence of a number of foreign Muslim overlords in northern India, and thus connected significant parts of the country with an expanding international Islamic world which, after the Mongol conquests, could be travelled from north Africa to China.²³

The new Turkish rulers also invaded southern India, plundering the traditional capital of the Hoysalas Dvarasamudram in 1310, and reaching the Pandya kingdom of Madurai in the following year. But although by 1328 there was even a Turkish kingdom in Madurai, these foreign armies could never secure a hold on southern India, perhaps because local conditions did not invite a long settlement and less remote conquests still had to be defended further to the north. The land was subject to the seasonal monsoons and comprised a large plateau, separated from the commercial western coast of Kanará and Malabar by a chain of mountains. In great part it was covered by forests and hills inhabited by independent tribes, although the more urbanized areas were populated by several Hindu ethnic groups of Dravidian descent speaking a variety of related languages – Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam. There were several wealthy cities and temples in the south, especially in

²³ On the Turkish invasions see the detailed work by Wolsley Haig in *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. III (Cambridge, 1928), especially chaps. 5 and 6. The South Indian perspective is summarily presented by Krishnaswami Aiyangar in *ibid.* pp. 467–99, and in more detail in his important work *South India and her Muhammadan invaders* (Madras, 1921). A useful overview is provided by R. Thapar in her *A history of India from the discovery to 1526* (Harmondsworth, 1966), pp. 229–40 (still valuable today). More recently, Burton Stein in his posthumous *A history of India* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 134–8, has emphasized that the Turkish horsemen did not simply defeat the native armies with surprising facility, they also defended their Indian conquests from Mongol attacks. This explains the strategic importance of Delhi for the Muslim invaders.

the fertile river deltas facing the east, but the peasant communities were strongly organized and had to be commanded locally.²⁴ The fragmented character of the indigenous political scene, with several thinly centralized little kingdoms ruled by groups of peasant-warriors who derived political legitimacy from Hindu brahminic consent, also helps explain why attempts to found a Muslim dynasty failed to win sufficient popular endorsement. It was therefore only through extremely violent methods that the Turkish adventurers who remained in southern India after the first plundering expeditions could maintain themselves against indigenous resistance, led in particular by the Hoysala king Vira Ballala III (1292–1342).

The exact circumstances of the foundation of the city and kingdom of Vijayanagara have long been a subject of debate, but must be seen in any case in the context of the persistence of the Hoysala power in parts of what is now modern Karnataka, against the fragility of any permanent invasion from Delhi.²⁵ While (as described by Ibn Battūta) Vira Ballala himself was killed in his failed campaign against the sultan of Madurai in 1342, his fortified centres in the northern frontier were the nucleus for the new kingdom of Vijayanagara, which was eventually able to defeat the isolated Turks in the south, and was also able to resist for over two centuries the Muslim armies which had settled successfully in the Deccan.

Thus, around the 1340s, two Indian brothers of the Sangama Family named Harihara and Bukka founded the new royal city by the Tungabhadra river (at the modern village of Hampi), not far from the site of the fortress of Anegondi, which until 1327 had been a focus of resistance to the Turkish armies. It seems that these Sangama brothers had in fact

²⁴ The geographical and agricultural pattern is studied in Burton Stein's fundamental *Peasant state and society in medieval South India* (New Delhi, 1980), especially pp. 30–62 and, concerning the Vijayanagara times, pp. 366–488. Against the traditional idealization of the supralocal ethnic solidarity of medieval local communities, Stein makes it clear that the peasant villages of the Tamil country were under the leadership of an elite of peasant-warrior entrepreneurs, often Telugu foreigners from the north.

²⁵ For a classic statement of the origins of the city, see N. Venkataramanayya, *Vijayanagara. Origin of the city and the Empire* (Madras, 1933), who insists on the idea (favoured by many scholars from Andhra) that the kingdom sprung from the attempts of an islamized Telugu family, former servants of the Kakatiyas of Warangal, to enforce Turkish authority against the resistance of the Hoysalas – followed, however, by their apostasy and independence from Delhi. The traditional and apparently simpler view, defended by Kannada historians like B. A. Saletore in his *Social and political life in the Vijayanagara Empire*, 2 vols. (Madras, 1932), is that the Hoysalas, as agents of local resistance, were behind Vijayanagara. The most important recent contribution to the debate is by Hermann Kulke, 'Maharajas, mahants and historians. Reflections on the historiography of early Vijayanagara and Sringeri', in A. Dallapiccola and S. Zingel-Ave (eds.) *Vijayanagara: city and empire*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, 1985), vol. I, pp. 120–43, who adopts a modified version of the Hoysala theory.

served the Kampili ruler of Anegondi, and after his defeat transferred their allegiance to the Hoysalas.²⁶ But the process may have been more complex than that: if we can trust a number of accounts, contemporary Arabic and Persian and sixteenth-century Sanskrit, the Sangama brothers were originally a Telugu family, former servants of the Kakatiya rulers of Warangal, who following the successive falls of Warangal (1323) and Kampili (1327) had been taken prisoners to Delhi, and after converting to Islam were sent as Turkish agents to take over the administration of the region.²⁷ Their apostasy and eventual emergence as a new Hindu dynasty could then be seen in the context of the vacuum created by a weakening of the Turkish military hold, and would imply rivalry with, rather than just allegiance to, the Hoysalas.

The fact is that the new kingdom expanded during the next two centuries, although not always at a steady pace, by winning over the allegiance of groups of Kannada- and Telugu-speaking warrior groups, and eventually conquering the Tamil south. The Vijayanagara rulers thus transformed the world visited by Marco Polo and Ibn Battūta into a more centralized and relatively stable kingdom, incorporating the various Hindu local cults and literary traditions, and benefiting from the new wealth created by the continuous processes of expanded land settlement and urbanization. The authority of this kingdom was vaguely held together by the threat of the Muslim invaders, who at the same time had successfully settled in the Deccan and created (against the wishes of the Delhi rulers) the independent Bahmani kingdom. Therefore, from the very beginning influential brahmin scholars and poets legitimized the kings of Vijayanagara as sustainers of a dharmic ideal of Hindu religious and social order. The successful rejection of Muslim overlords did not

²⁶ Kulke (*ibid.*) argues for the continuity between Vijayanagara and Hoysala powers, and for the posteriority of the brahmin Vidyaranya's role as spiritual guide of the early dynasty. The traditions presenting this Hindu sage as the main inspiration for the foundation of the city (which I shall discuss in chapter 8) would then be interpreted as sixteenth-century forgeries.

²⁷ Kulke (*ibid.*) is not convincing when he doubts the traditional account that the Sangama brothers had at some point converted to Islam. Kulke's argument that the inglorious event would have been passed in silence after their re-conversion to Hinduism begs the question of why the story that the founders of the city were sent by the king of Delhi persisted in the native accounts up to the sixteenth century, as reflected, for instance, in the story heard by Fernão Nunes in the 1530s. Sanskrit sources also dating from the sixteenth century largely agree with Nunes. The detail of religious conversion was omitted from all these accounts (indeed following Kulke's logic), but the parallels in fourteenth-century Muslim accounts such as Ibn Battūta's, who does mention conversion to Islam and whose story unambiguously concerns the sons of the king of Kampili, are striking enough and not to be ignored. Over two centuries Hindu native sources might have easily transferred the emphasis from conversion and apostasy to the more agreeable myth of the influence of the sage Vidyaranya.

however mean that Vijayanagara was isolated from Deccani influences. This is particularly clear if we consider that the remarkable success of the rulers of the new empire, who to a certain degree had become ‘kings of kings’, was in fact the assertion of territorial authority against both Hindu and Muslim rivals through military means.²⁸ While one permanent issue was consolidating the unevenly spread royal authority against a variety of centrifugal forces, the evolution of the kingdom for 200 years was to a great extent conditioned by the ability of the rulers to adapt their vast armies to changing conditions of warfare. This involved securing the importation of horses, accepting Muslim mercenaries and (as the Portuguese were to witness in the early sixteenth century) even incorporating artillery and musketeers into their campaigns.

The Sangama dynasty of Vijayanagara had a history of some 150 years marked by conflict against the Bahmani sultanate across the northern frontier, until, following a particularly difficult period of internal instability (always a recurrent problem), it gave way to a second dynasty in 1485, named after the successful general Saluva Narasimha. The rise to power of successful generals with their own territorial resources, first as regents and then as founders of new dynasties, actually became a pattern of the political history of the kingdom during the first half of the sixteenth century, underpinning a traditional weakness in the system of succession and transfer of power. Thus there was again much instability during the reign of Saluva’s son Immadi Narasimha (1491–1505), which was resolved with the rise to power of the regent Narasa Nayaka, whose own son founded the Tuluva dynasty as Vira Narasimha (1505–9).²⁹ But it was only his brother Krishna Deva Raya (1509–29) who was able to

²⁸ Through trade, war and diplomacy Vijayanagara was culturally connected to the wider Islamic world. Secular architecture similarly reflected Muslim Deccani influences. At its most extreme, modern historical analysis suggests that the Vijayanagara kings represented a process of ‘islamicization’ – which would explain the adoption of titles such as ‘sultan of Hindu kings’ (*himduraya suratrana*) by the Sangama brothers. See P. B. Wagoner, “‘Sultan among Hindu Kings’: dress, titles and islamicization of Hindu culture at Vijayanagara”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 55 (1996): 851–80. In my view, this does not detract from the fact that religious conversion, or lack thereof, was a key issue, and that the dharmic ideal defined by Sanskrit brahminic culture and its South Indian vernacular variations did provide a focus of identity and legitimation for the empire of Vijayanagara. Vijayanagara was simultaneously both a Hindu bulwark against Muslim conquests (the traditional view criticized by Wagoner) and a centre of adoption of a number of international Islamic cultural values. One could even say that to some extent it was because they imitated the practices of Islamic peoples that the Vijayanagara elites were relatively efficient in resisting Islamic armies.

²⁹ There is still no scholarly consensus concerning the dates for all these reigns – in fact, the whole political history of the kingdom is like a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces missing. For instance, a different chronology is given by J. M. Fritz and G. Michell, *City of victory. Vijayanagara, the medieval Hindu capital of Southern India* (New York, 1991), p. 114, as follows: Saluva Narasimha, 1484–92; Immadi Narasimha, 1492–1506; Vira

consolidate this third dynasty and, through a process of centralization and conquest, led to what was then, and is still described as, the major moment of glory of Vijayanagara. This Indian king, who kept in check the powerful Muslim rulers of Bijapur as well as the Hindu kings of Orissa, became known as one of the richest in the East.³⁰

However, the solidity of his achievement came into question during the reign of his brother Achyuta Deva Raya (1529–42), when factional struggle allowed the shah of Bijapur to recover the initiative. Although the Hindu empire had outlived the Bahmanis, which had disintegrated into five sultanates at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it eventually succumbed to the consequences of a spectacular military defeat against a Decanni alliance in 1565. The regent Rama Raja (1542–65), in fact an usurper from the powerful Aravidu family and whose influence went back to the times of Krishna Deva Raya, was killed in battle. More importantly, the city was shamefully abandoned by his surviving brother and destroyed, and future attempts to re-establish its authority over South India proved utterly futile.

In some ways Rama Raja had been victim of his own previous success, because he had alienated all potential allies with a ruthlessly aggressive policy. It is, however, the failure of his internal policy that, with hindsight, appears to be more conspicuous. The total defeat of 1565, which led to a new collection of Hindu regional lordships that were progressively plundered or conquered by expeditions from the Deccan, definitively uncovered the internal weakness of the Vijayanagara overlordship. A rump state of Vijayanagara under the Aravidu royal dynasty survived by moving its capital east, to Penugonda and finally Chandragiri, but (at the time when Akbar's Mughal empire was expanding in the north) it was no longer an effective political force beyond its modest regional boundaries. In fact, the new regional lords who throughout the century following the fall of the old capital competed against the Aravidu kings from their various quasi-independent cities of Madurai, Tanjore, Gingee or Mysore, were often the old nayakas, or captains, originally sent by the Vijayanagara rulers as representatives of their authority in the east and south of the peninsula.³¹

Narasimha, 1506–9; Krishna Deva Raya, 1510–29, etc. I shall discuss contentious dates only when my argument requires it.

³⁰ The Portuguese were told by the ruler of Gujarat, Bahadur, that in terms of wealth if the king of Cambay himself was one, the king of Narsinga was two and that of Bengal three: Barros, *Asia*, 3 vols containing decades 1–3 (Lisbon, 1932–92), vol. I, p. 350. (Vol. III of this edition – the best available – is a facsimile of the 1563 edition.)

³¹ The above summary of Vijayanagara history is of course only a brief sketch. On the political evolution of Vijayanagara the fundamental work is now Stein, *Vijayanagara*, carefully reviewed in S. Subrahmanyam, 'Agreeing to disagree: Burton Stein on

SOURCES AND GENRES: HISTORICAL AND ANTIQUARIAN PERSPECTIVES

As we have seen, the presence of political unity and centralized institutions played a crucial role in shaping the European interpretation of foreign societies in the Renaissance. The fact that Vijayanagara was a Hindu political society which was essentially defined in opposition to the religious domination of Islam (even though in reality the Vijayanagara elites may have borrowed a number of practices from their Muslim neighbours) is of great importance, especially considering the analogous European tradition of confrontation with Islam. The medieval European tendency to 'Christianize' Eastern rulers in terms of the mythical figure of the Prester John could therefore find a ready niche in non-Muslim India. It is also noteworthy that the experience of Vijayanagara made its impact before the Europeans had any full access to the more remote 'gentile' societies of Ming China or Japan. It is not comparable to the experience of the Aztec and Inca empires in America either, since these were almost immediately conquered and disorganized. The image of an idolatrous civilization presented by Vijayanagara was therefore a challenge to European narrative topoi and political ideas that had few counterparts in the sixteenth century.³²

I shall attempt to analyse comprehensively and chronologically all European descriptions of the kingdom of Vijayanagara which involved a substantial and direct interpretation of South Indian society and culture (less important references, and accounts of a derivative character, will be

Vijayanagara', *South Asia Research*, 17 (1997): 127–39. Stein's work is to a large extent a reaction to the traditional perspective of South Indian nationalism, as summarized by K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A history of South India*, 3rd edn (Madras 1966), pp. 227–312. In his studies – *Peasant state* and *Vijayanagara* – Stein has emphasized instead internal economic and political processes. Other important works are R. Sewell, *A forgotten empire (Vijayanagar)* (London, 1900); S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar (ed.) *Sources of Vijayanagara history* (Madras, 1919); K. A. Nilakanta Sastri and N. Venkataramanayya, *Further sources of Vijayanagara history*, 3 vols. (Madras, 1946); J. M. Fritz, G. Michell and M. S. Nagaraja Rao, *Where kings and gods meet. The royal centre at Vijayanagara* (Tucson, 1984), and some of the articles collected in A. Dallapiccola and S. Zingel-Ave (eds.) *Vijayanagara: city and empire*. For the surviving fourth dynasty, H. Heras, *The Aravidu dynasty of Vijayanagara* (Madras, 1927), remains essential. Concerning social and economic conditions see also N. Venkataramanayya, *Studies in the history of the third dynasty of Vijayanagara* (Madras, 1935), and T. V. Mahalingam, *Administration and social life under Vijayanagara* (Madras, 1940). On the Deccan see H. K. Sherwani, *The Bahmanis of the Deccan*, 2nd edn (New Delhi, 1985).

³² Other non-Muslim oriental societies – like Siam, Pegu and Cambodia – had a less intense effect in the European experience overseas, although they are not to be entirely neglected. For the Portuguese in Siam, see Maria da Conceição Flores, *Os portugueses e o Sião no século XVI* (Lisbon, 1995), and for Cambodia, B. Groslier, *Angkor et la Cambodge au XVIe siècle d'après les sources portugaises et espagnoles* (Paris, 1958).

treated only when they illuminate a particular point). These descriptions were all produced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, until the destruction of the capital city and the disintegration of its authority in the south (1420–1570). The analysis, however, will be extended to encompass earlier and later descriptions of South India, so as to explain the process of change from the times of Marco Polo at the end of the thirteenth century to those of Pietro della Valle at the beginning of the seventeenth. The criterion that I have followed in assessing the interest of the material is the existence of a body of literature that makes an argument about the evolution of travel literature not only possible, but also enlightening. For this reason also, when descriptions of areas not directly controlled by Vijayanagara (such as the Malabar coast) throw light on the argument, they have been freely brought into the discussion. On the other hand, the survival of a fourth dynasty in Chandragiri after 1565 – in effect a rump Vijayanagara – will be analysed only to the extent that it adds significantly to the argument.

This overall exercise will necessarily involve discussing what modern historians have to say about Vijayanagara, since this is the essential tool for a critical appraisal of foreign descriptions of the empire. The group of texts formed by these descriptions provides a matrix from which to discover continuities and change throughout three centuries. It furthermore serves as model and example for the main themes, genres and problems which appear in the wider cultural process of the European interpretation of oriental peoples in the Renaissance. The main purpose of this study is thus to reveal through a particular case the different registers of the process of transforming an ‘experience of otherness’ into a set of narratives. In interpreting each text I shall consider not only authorship, but also the expectations of audiences and, when relevant, distinct processes of transmission and re-interpretation (since quite often what was observed in India differed from what was publicized and interpreted in Europe). I will follow the principle that we need a complex interpretation for each text – something like a language-game theory – involving general rules, particular aims and diverse expectations, which I shall define in each case.

The especial value of contemporary descriptions of Vijayanagara is that they enable the historian to compare analogous material and to isolate important variables. This can be seen to operate in three ways. First, and chronologically, it is possible to compare descriptions from different periods. Second, the existence of a body of literature produced by non-European foreigners, in particular by Muslims writing in Persian and Arabic, provides an opportunity to interpret western descriptions in a wider comparative framework. Finally, the existence of many different

kinds of accounts – letters, chronicles, itineraries, relations, geographical reports and cosmographies – facilitates the task of analysing the production of ethnography as related to different narrative structures. A brief discussion of the sources according to these three aspects may be useful at this point.

A chronological sequence

In order to achieve a perspective on Renaissance ethnology going back to medieval Europe and to identify the impact of fifteenth-century humanism it is possible to contrast Marco Polo's description of South India (1298) with that of another Venetian merchant who actually visited the city of Vijayanagara, Nicolò de Conti (who gave two very different reports, in 1437 and in 1441). These medieval merchant accounts can offer a perspective to assess the qualities of the two major Portuguese sources on Vijayanagara given by the horse-traders Domingos Paes (written in 1520–2) and Fernão Nunes (possibly written in 1531).³³ This second comparison can shed light on the way the new colonial conditions of Portuguese Asia affected the attitudes and descriptive skills of European observers of similar social background.

The initial ethnographic practice of those Europeans who came with the first Portuguese expeditions can be discussed more specifically with reference to letters and journals describing a novel experience of India, of which I will provide some analysis. In a few cases, these early accounts also included references to Vijayanagara, and some of them appeared in print in the *Paesi novamenti ritrovati* of 1507. While some accounts of the kingdom (like the Venetian report by Francisco de Albuquerque) remained marginal, observations by the Italian Ludovico de Varthema (first published in 1510) and the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa (written c. 1516–18) appear in two of the most important narratives of the first half of the sixteenth century, increasing our ability to follow a continuous chronological sequence of written texts. This continuity can be taken further into the sixteenth century thanks to the existence of a final description of the city in the narrative of another Venetian merchant, Cesare Federici (published in 1587), which is based on what he saw in Vijayanagara in 1566, soon after the disastrous battle of Talikota.³⁴

³³ The name in the manuscript, Nuniz, is commonly modernized as Nunes. I have also corrected the hypothesis of Robert Sewell in *A forgotten empire* that Nunes's account was written in 1535–7. *Circa* 1531 seems more consistent with the evidence (see chapter 8 below).

³⁴ I will throughout this work refer to 'the battle of Talikota' in agreement with the name by which it is commonly known. It must be stressed, however, that the battle took place some distance from that location, as discussed by Heras, *Aravidu dynasty*.