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978-0-521-17416-9 - The Political Economy of Craft Production: Crafting Empire in South India, c. 1350-1650

Carla M. Sinopoli

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1 | Introduction: crafting empire in South India

Specialized craft production and craft producers have a prominent place in archaeological studies of early states and empires. Social and economic differentiation are defining characteristics of such societies, and through analyses of material remains and the contexts of their production and consumption, archaeologists can examine both the organization of production and the social, economic, and political statuses and inter-relations of producers and consumers of craft goods. In this work, I examine the social and political significance of craft production and consumption in the Vijayanagara empire, an expansive polity that dominated much of South India from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries AD.

My study of the political economy of specialized craft production in historic South India situates both political economy and specialized production in the broadest possible frame. I view “political economy” as the relations between political structures and systems (including the constitution of political authority) and the economic realms of production, consumption and exchange (e.g., G. Stein 2001: 356). “Specialized craft production” is understood as the investment of labor by (more or less) skilled practitioners in the production of diverse goods that are in turn consumed by non-producers. My goals are both to learn more about Vijayanagara and the lives and products of the diverse subjects of this large and complex empire, and to contribute to broader theoretical understandings of empires, imperial economies, specialized production, and archaeological and historical approaches to the study of states in South Asia and beyond.

The diverse archaeological and written sources of evidence available on the Vijayanagara period provide rich evidence with which to explore these issues. More than twenty years of systematic archaeological research in the core and hinterland of the first Vijayanagara capital, described in chapter 5, have provided detailed information on a range of material goods produced by specialists, from architecture to earthenware ceramics. These goods defined and constrained the spaces and settings in which political, religious, military, economic, and other activities of daily life occurred in this seminal region of the empire. Excluding temples, which have been documented throughout the empire, only the Vijayanagara capital is known from systematic

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archaeological and architectural research. However, the many written sources from the period also provide valuable insights into the social, economic, and organizational structures of craft production, and on many durable and non-durable craft goods. These sources, summarized in chapter 5, include thousands of inscriptions carved on temple walls and copper plates, contemporary South Indian literary works, and the accounts of foreign visitors to the empire, as well as post-Vijayanagara colonial documents. Unlike the available archaeological evidence, the written sources both span the entire empire and extend our temporal range beyond the abandonment of the first Vijayanagara capital in AD 1565.

I approach the study of Vijayanagara craft production from two seemingly disparate theoretical perspectives, one drawn from anthropology and the other from South Asian historiography. From anthropology, I build upon the theoretical and comparative literature on the economic, political, and social significances of specialized craft production and material culture. For decades, archaeologists have studied craft production as a route to understanding the emergence and organization of ancient states and empires. Specialist production of diverse categories of craft goods provides both the prestige items necessary to political elites and the essential commodities that fuel the internal and external economies of early states and empires. Archaeological approaches to craft production, summarized in chapter 2, have documented the scale and organization of production units in particular historical settings, and have sought to identify actors and institutions able to exert control over craft production, craft goods, and the people who produced them. As I will elaborate in chapter 2, most discussions of craft production in state societies take as underlying assumptions that both the scale of production units and institutional ability to control production increases in parallel with political complexity. The Vijayanagara evidence provides an opportunity to evaluate these two assumptions in the context of a very large, very complex imperial polity, and in this case, at least, neither is supported.

From South Asian historiography, I approach the study of Vijayanagara craft production and political economy from the perspective of ancient and more recent discussions about the nature of the state in precolonial Asia and, particularly, India. As I discuss in chapter 3, in much South Asian historiography images of tyrannical despots have been interwoven with those of autonomous caste-ridden village republics in curious ways. The result is a view of a timeless, history-less, past, in which technologies, identities, political institutions and responses to them are viewed as stable and, indeed, stagnant.

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In recent years, numerous scholars have called these long-standing beliefs into question (e.g., Chattopadhyaya 1994; Inden 1990; Kulke 1995a; Talbot 2001), and have proposed alternate models for understanding precolonial South Asian states (e.g., Indian feudalism, segmentary states, patrimonial states; see chapter 3). Several of these have been applied to Vijayanagara, with varying success (see chapters 3 and 4). Nonetheless, earlier concepts of the Asian state have had remarkable endurance, and underlie many historical and archaeological studies of precolonial South Asia. These same perspectives, I believe, have also played a significant and under-appreciated role in the development of anthropological and archaeological approaches to the “ancient state,” creating a point of intersection between my broader anthropological interests and my South Asian concerns. I will return to these questions in chapter 8.

While I position my study of Vijayanagara in the context of general models of craft production and the Asian state, I also situate it in the historic particularities of fourteenth- through seventeenth-century South India. The Vijayanagara period was a time of dramatic changes in South Indian society and economy. These changes include the adoption or appearance of new political and military structures and strategies; the expansion and growth of urban centers; increasing monetization and growth in local and long-distance commerce; dramatic expansions in craft and agricultural production; and population growth and redistribution. As I elaborate in chapter 4, many of these trends began in the centuries preceding the emergence of Vijayanagara. However, they intensified and coalesced in new ways during the Vijayanagara period, with important consequences for craft production and craft products, as well as the political structures of the Vijayanagara empire.

An additional characteristic of the Vijayanagara period, relevant to the study of craft production, concerns the many and diverse institutions and actors who played important roles in social, political, religious, and economic institutions and spheres. Power, political and otherwise, was distributed among imperial and regional hereditary elites and administrators, military officers, temple institutions and leaders of diverse religious sects, merchant associations, and various caste and regional organizations. Rulers and state institutions were part of this complex array, but were far from the only, or even necessarily the most important, players. The relations between these diverse figures and institutions were neither uncontested nor stable; competition and factionalism (e.g., Brumfiel and Fox 1994) were widespread, creating contentious and shifting political and economic structures and

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relations that varied over both time and space. Historian David Ludden has described South India between c. AD 1200 and 1700 as

a terrain of perpetual movement, where social, political, and economic order only emerged in the context of constant, pervasive conflict and adjustment. Vertical conflicts in the social relations of inequality and hierarchy generated patterns of social subordination. Horizontal conflicts among social groups created schisms, partitions, fragmentations and segregations among groups . . . Religious and political elites in these centers of power envisioned the localities of social reproduction as components of their own domain, as units of an orderly system established by their own moral authority. But these temple and court elites exerted their power in a social world that they did not control: elites engaged local concatenations of power that could not be reduced to regulation by temple and court. In pre-modern India, a vast array of local actors exercised structural powers to transform local society, changing their own material world and terms of their social transactions. (Ludden 1996: 109)

For craft production, one of the consequences of this “constant, pervasive conflict and adjustment” was the presence of numerous potential and competing patrons for craft products and their producers. Particularly desired craft goods were those that served as symbols of status and prestige, including elaborate textiles and the works of court poets, as well as monumental temples and palaces, and military paraphernalia. The presence of multiple consumers and patrons for such goods may have provided at least some craft producers with much greater potential for social and economic mobility than was possible in less differentiated, more linearly hierarchical, state systems. There is considerable evidence for social mobility among various craft-producing communities and individuals throughout the Vijayanagara period (see chapters 6 and 7).

Along with being patrons and consumers of craft products, many of the diverse South Indian elites of the Vijayanagara period gained substantial economic benefits from the expansion of craft production and commerce. Taxation on raw materials, production, finished goods, and commerce provided important revenues to political and military leaders. As I discuss in chapter 7, taxes were assessed and collected, usually in currency, at a variety of levels – by kings, imperial administrators, and their representatives; military officers; hereditary local elites; caste and merchant organizations; and village and town councils. Tax payers, predominantly non-elite artisans and agriculturalists, were well aware of the complex and dynamic political conditions under which they lived, and there are several documented cases of their successful resistance of excessive taxation through large-scale collective action. Taxes that were collected were reallocated and deployed

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through a variety of hierarchical and horizontal routes. Some, often only a small percentage, flowed from local administrators to imperial coffers. In other cases, individuals authorized to collect taxes reallocated them to religious institutions or to individuals associated with temples. These institutions, many of which grew to considerable size during the Vijayanagara period, both employed large numbers of artisans in a variety of capacities and were actively involved in the economic expansion that characterized the Vijayanagara period, particularly the growth of agricultural and craft (particularly textile) production (see chapters 4 and 7).

While taxation and the resultant revenue generation and redistribution were critical to the Vijayanagara political economy, it is important to note that although diverse institutions benefitted from the revenues generated by craft production, there is no evidence that they ever sought to directly regulate craft goods or administer their production.

During the Vijayanagara period, the status and organization of individual craft-producing communities differed considerably. These differences were the result of a complex array of factors, including the nature and value of the goods produced, as well as the historical, social, and physical contexts in which production occurred. It is thus not possible to use a single craft to characterize Vijayanagara craft production, and in this study, I examine a very broad array of material and non-material crafts.

Before examining the complexity and variation in Vijayanagara craft production and political economy, I begin here with some broad generalizations. First, I have already noted that most crafts and craft producers were not directly administered by the Vijayanagara state or by other institutions, such as temples. This does not mean that certain acts of production and producers were not “attached” to institutions in a variety of ways, but attached specialization was, overall, not the dominant social relation of production for most crafts.

Second, Vijayanagara craft production was characterized by a very high degree of economic specialization. This is most dramatic in textile production, where weavers, dyers, washers, fabric painters, and textile merchants each constituted a discrete occupational group (or groups; see chapter 6).

Third, most, though certainly not all, craft producers were members of hereditary groups – castes, subcastes, and lineages – each with a unique history, social identity, traditional occupation, and social status (though the latter, at least, was often contested). While membership in hereditary caste groups was an important factor influencing both social identity and occupation, it is also important to note that there was considerable economic,

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social, and occupational mobility during the Vijayanagara period, at both individual and group levels.

A fourth, and perhaps obvious, generalization about Vijayanagara craft production is a necessary consequence of the high degree of economic specialization noted above. As a result of this specialization, producers were necessarily interconnected through complex webs of interaction and interdependence. Specialist producers required raw materials, processed goods, and finished artifacts from other artisans, as well as foodstuffs available from agriculturalists or in markets. The relations among diverse artisans were structured and regulated at a variety of levels, involving individual producers and workshops, caste organizations, merchant associations, and, rarely, the state.

A fifth, and far from obvious, generalization about Vijayanagara craft production is that despite the complexity and intensity of craft production in fourteenth- through seventeenth-century South India, we do not see the development of large-scale, centrally administered, units of craft production, such as factories or imperial workshops. Even as the demand for craft products increased significantly, the vast majority of craft production activities took place in small-scale household workshops. I discuss a number of exceptions to this later in this work, but the dominance of small-scale household production in conditions of high output and demand and within an extremely complex political landscape is striking, and quite different from what most models of craft production in state societies would lead us to expect.

The disparities between the Vijayanagara evidence and many of our expectations for the organization of craft production raise important questions concerning both our theoretical models and the particular conditions of fourteenth- to seventeenth-century South India. In attempting to pursue such questions, this study is situated within contemporary theoretical perspectives in both anthropological archaeology and South Asian history, which explore the complexity and diversity of the kinds of political, economic, and social relations and authority that existed in ancient states and empires, and acknowledge the limitations of centralized control in such contexts. I will return to these themes in the conclusions of this work, after first examining the Vijayanagara evidence in detail.

As noted, my study of Vijayanagara employs a diverse range of archaeological and textual sources. The archaeological data are derived from my and others' fieldwork in and around the eponymous first capital of the empire, and allow an exploration of various craft products and the contexts in which they were produced, consumed, and discarded. Written sources include

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inscriptions, literary works, the accounts of foreign visitors to Vijayanagara, and post-Vijayanagara colonial sources.

Each of these sources of evidence has inevitable epistemological problems – of translation and interpretation – and each is biased, whether by factors of archaeological preservation, geographic and historical context, or by the political standing and interpretive predispositions of foreign observers or their diverse South Indian creators. I will address these limitations as I present the data. What I do not wish to rehearse is a formulaic discussion of the advantages or disadvantages of historical versus archaeological data. Both are valuable; both are problematic. Nor do I necessarily seek or expect consistency between or among these various sources. Following much contemporary social theory, I expect that complex societies are indeed complex, and often messy – that motivations in one domain may be counteracted by those in others; that people do not necessarily act to enhance the coherence of a systemic whole; and that in imperial contexts in particular the many diverse participants in political and economic relations and transactions may often be in conflict and contradiction with each other; and their decisions and actions may be contingent and responsive to particular situations and events, rather than systemic or systematic. Although seldom neat or consistent, the diverse sources of evidence on Vijayanagara provide windows into the complexities of the period and the lived lives of both the subjects and rulers of empire. I explore these complexities through examining the roles of courts, temples, and diverse social groups and their material products in the production of craft goods and the production of social relations in fourteenth- through seventeenth-century South India.

In chapter 2, I present an overview of recent archaeological literature on specialist craft production and its relevance to the study of complex societies. My concern is not with the emergence of specialized production, which has been addressed by Rice (1981, 1991), Arnold (1985), and Costin (1986), among others. Instead, I restrict my focus to those issues relevant to an exploration of the social, political, and economic dynamics of specialized production in the context of a polity characterized by high degrees of economic specialization. Issues addressed include the continuum of attached vs. independent specialization and its relevance to questions of “control,” the archaeological indicators of different productive modes, and questions of agency, identity, and the various kinds of “power” exerted or controlled by producers in early states and empires.

Vijayanagara emerged nearly two thousand years after the earliest historic states of South Asia (and four millennia after the Indus Valley states, with their well-documented evidence for productive specialization, but with little

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evidence for any significant impact on later political developments in the region). Within South India, Vijayanagara built on a nearly two millennia long history of social and economic complexity. Specialist production had appeared in the region by the mid-first millennium BC, and artisans and artisan guilds are attested in the literary sources from the early first millennium AD. Although distinctive, and in many respects radically different from the economies of earlier states in the region, the Vijayanagara economy was nonetheless not constructed anew, but built on complex and long-lasting historical developments of statehood, and economic, ideological and social structures, including those of caste differentiation. The inhabitants of pre-British South India were indeed a “people with history” (*pace* Wolf 1982) and the story of Vijayanagara specialized craft production does not begin from an undifferentiated, unspecialized past.

In chapter 2, I propose a very broad definition of “craft.” This definition encompasses goods with material outcomes accessible to archaeology, as well as those with less tangible outcomes that nonetheless involve skilled producers with access to specialized knowledge and techniques/technologies, who manufactured a product for one or more consumers other than, or in addition to, themselves. Thus, I include such archaeologically invisible (or often so) artisans as poets, bards, dancers, and musicians as craft specialists, along with the more conventional weavers, potters, masons, and smiths.

Chapter 2 also reviews various archaeological and theoretical approaches to the study of craft specialization. In particular, I focus on models for the organization of specialized production that address the size and composition of productive units, productive scale and intensity, and the relations of artisans to centralized institutions. I next turn to a brief discussion of identity and social action among craft producers. Here, I put the producers as social actors at the center, rather than focusing on producers as “acted upon” by institutions or structural forms, and address the social transmission, contexts, and meanings associated with craft production. I then discuss some recent approaches to material culture, to refocus again, this time on the goods that craft specialists produce and that archaeologists most often rely upon in order to study both specialized production and the broader societies in which goods were made and used. I conclude the chapter with a more explicit discussion of craft and political economy, focusing on relations between production and the state and the diverse roles that craft goods fill in state societies.

In chapter 3, I turn to a consideration of the historiography of the Asian state, with a particular focus on South Asia. It may seem unnecessary to

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reprieve critiques of Oriental Despotism or the Asiatic Mode of Production in this work. However, I will argue that these views (or various of their intellectual descendants) continue to figure prominently, though seldom explicitly, in interpretations of South Asian states, as well as in how archaeologists have interpreted the region's prehistoric and historic past, and early states more generally. Images of autonomous isolated villages whose inhabitants plied unchanging technologies and ways of life, and of rulers who are variously portrayed as tyrannical despots or, more commonly today, ritual figureheads, continue to be widespread in both popular media and academic discourse. And in South Asian archaeology, exogenous factors – most often population movement and replacement – continue to dominate accounts of sociopolitical and material culture transformations, and indeed are often considered the only possible causes of change in such innately “static” societies.

Many studies of the South Asian state have emphasized the region's historical uniqueness. While this is of course valid, the failure to contextualize understandings of South Asia in a broader, comparative, intellectual framework is problematic. Judicious attention to appropriate comparative sources can help us to better frame South Asian history, and prehistory, in the context of general understandings of state formation and organization, as well as to examine the distinctive histories of particular cases. Further, by adopting a broader theoretical approach, South Asian specialists will also be in a better position to bring our rich data and interpretations to bear on anthropological theory and approaches. Even today, and despite a wealth of archaeological information and high-quality data, the Indus Valley or Harappan civilization is still frequently portrayed as unknown and unknowable; and few western scholars know even this much about the succeeding periods of state and empire formation in the Ganges Basin, the Deccan, or South India. This book will not address these gaps in archaeological knowledge, but I do wish to briefly explore some of historic underpinnings for their existence.

In chapter 4, I turn to the specific historical and archaeological context of my research: the fourteenth- to seventeenth-century South Indian Vijayanagara empire. I summarize recent research on the period, which has been the focus of considerable archaeological and historical scrutiny since the late 1970s. I begin with an historic overview of some of Vijayanagara's predecessors – the Chola, Kakatiya, Hoysala, and Chalukya states – in order to explore some of the historical context for later Vijayanagara developments. Next, following an outline of dynastic history and imperial geography, I turn to a more detailed focus on several issues of particular relevance to this study:

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political structures and players; the significance of temples; and the nature and constitution of social and economic groups, including occupational communities, village servants, merchant guilds, and caste organizations. I conclude the chapter with a summary of three important perspectives on the Vijayanagara empire – presented by historians K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, Burton Stein, and Noburu Karashima – each with quite different implications for the interpretation of Vijayanagara political economies.

In chapter 5, I summarize the nature and range of the textual and archaeological sources of evidence concerning Vijayanagara that provide the primary sources of evidence for this study. I consider their relevance to the study of craft production, as well as their limitations. I briefly describe the recently completed Vijayanagara Metropolitan Survey project, which focused on documenting economic activities in the c. 450-square kilometer hinterland of the imperial capital of Vijayanagara. The geographic biases of this research will be addressed. That is, detailed archaeological research of the estimated 360,000-square kilometer imperial territory has been largely restricted to the c. 450-square kilometer region surrounding the empire's first capital. This is a minuscule sample of the empire as a whole (studies of Vijayanagara architecture have, however, been far more expansive, see Michell 1995). As noted, text-based historical research has been more extensive, but until quite recently has been biased toward the Tamil-speaking regions of the southeastern area of the empire.

In chapters 6 and 7, I focus explicitly on craft production during the Vijayanagara period. I combine archaeological and textual data to address technologies of production, as well as producers as individuals and members of small and large-scale social groups, and in relation to state and religious institutions. Chapter 6 organizes these data by individual crafts or technologies. Some crafts I consider, such as poetry, music, and dance, rarely appear in archaeological studies in concert with such prosaic crafts as ceramic or metal production. However, I include them here both because they are the products of specialist labor, and because they figured importantly in diverse Vijayanagara-period political and ideological arenas.

Chapter 6 begins with poetry and ends with potsherd. In between, I discuss musicians and dancers – including the temple women who so intrigued colonial authors – weavers, smiths and metal workers, stone workers, and wood workers. The sources of evidence – written and material – for each of these categories of producers are variable and each craft can be broken down in diverse ways, based on location, caste affiliation, productive technology, or the consumers of their products. For each craft addressed, I attempt to explore the nature and sources of this variability.