The Multiple Landscapes of Vijayanagara

From the Mythic and the Ritual to the Kingly and the Common

BY ALEXANDRA MACK

VIJAYANAGARA, THE CAPITAL of an empire that flourished in southern India from the 14th to the 16th centuries AD, has been a focus of archaeological study for several decades. My own archaeological research there has focused on the districts surrounding the major Hindu temple complexes and the social relations and interactions that took place in those areas. The ruins of the site lie on the southern bank of the Tungabhadra River in central Karnataka. The river forms a small gorge as it passes through the granite outcrops and ridges that create a visually striking terrain.

Vijayanagara was the capital city of an empire that covered most of southern India from the 14th through the 16th centuries AD. This map shows the imperial boundary, temple centers, and other important sites in the 16th century.
Modern pilgrims heading to worship at the Virupaksha Temple, which has remained in continuous worship from before the Vijayangara period to the present.

The site was an established Hindu pilgrimage center before the city was founded, and the capital’s role as a center of government and imperial power became intertwined with religious meanings. However, the activities at the site did not involve just power relations and ritual interactions—Vijayanagara was a complete urban center where residents took care of all the details of daily life. The physical environment was thus overlain with several perceived landscapes: a mythological landscape in which deities lived epic tales; a landscape of power for kings and other high-class citizens; a pilgrimage landscape for devotees visiting temples; and a quotidian landscape for ordinary residents.

THE MYTHOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

The Sangama brothers, Bukka and Harihara, founded the city in the mid-14th century. While the details of their rise to power are unclear, they appear to have consciously chosen the site for their capital because of its mythological associations. Inscriptions indicate that the goddess Pampa resided in the area and that the site attracted pilgrims as early as the 7th century. Pampa was eventually brought into the larger pan-Indian religious tradition by marrying Virupaksha, an incarnation of Shiva, one of the major Hindu deities. The site became the center of the Virupaksha cult by the 12th century, and the Virupaksha temple continues to serve as a pilgrimage center today.

Shiva was not the only god associated with Vijayanagara. Local tradition places the site in the heart of Kishkinda, the monkey kingdom referred to in the epic Ramayana. The epic tells the story of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, another of the major Hindu deities. Rama was a prince of Ayodhya, who, although set to inherit the throne, was banished for fourteen years. His wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana joined him in exile. During this time, Sita was kidnapped, setting off a series
The towering gateway of the Virupaksha temple complex is visible from a kilometer away. Although most other temples in Vijayanagara fell into disuse after 1565, the Virupaksha temple has remained in continuous worship since at least the 12th century AD.
of adventures in which Rama, with the help of Lakshmana and the monkey Hanuman, found her and eventually returned to rule Ayodhya. Rama’s various adventures highlight his duty to uphold the moral order, and in Hindu tradition, he is often regarded as the ideal king. The area around Vijayanagara contains many sites that are said to be locations of specific events from the Ramayana.

THE LANDSCAPE OF POWER

Vijayanagara rulers manipulated the mythic associations of the site to enhance their own power and to legitimate their rule in the eyes of local chiefs and other high-ranking citizens. The site itself was chosen to associate the kings with the god Virupaksha. In the 15th century Vijayanagara rulers generally elevated the worship of Vishnu and specifically strengthened their connection with Rama, the ideal king. The Ramachandra temple, dedicated to the worship of Rama, lay both in the heart of the Royal Center, where the kings’ power was concentrated, and at the center of circulation routes through the city. Several additional temple complexes were constructed in the 15th and 16th centuries, funded in large part by the royal coffers.

Temples dominate the landscapes in which they sit. Today, most of the Vijayanagara temples lie in partial ruin, but standing temples relay the monumentality of these structures. Although the towers of most of the gateways are weathered and no longer rise to their original heights, many are nonetheless still visible from vantage points throughout the city. Thus, the most dominant landscape features were directly associated with the kings because of the royal funds that aided their construction.
THE RITUAL LANDSCAPE

While the temples were endowed by kings in part to provide a visible display of power and wealth and to legitimize their own rule, religious devotion was their motivation for constructing these temples. Pilgrims experienced the landscape through ritualized movements enforced by the spatial configuration of the districts around the temples. The district surrounding the 16th century Vitthala temple complex demonstrates how restricted access controlled the flow of people through space and directed lines of sight toward the temples.

At 1.3 hectares, the Vitthala temple complex was one of the largest at Vijayanagara, and the entire Vitthala district contains the remains of several additional religious complexes, including a monastery and several subsidiary shrines. Two colonnaded streets lie outside the eastern gateway of the Vitthala complex. One leads to the north and ends at a small walled temple complex. The east-west street was the ceremonial route for chariots, ending a kilometer from the temple at an elaborately decorated open pavilion. Shrines, tanks, and the remains of rubble-walled residential structures border the street.

Because it is well enclosed by the granite ridges, the Vitthala temple is not easily seen from outside its surrounding district, except from particularly high vantage points. Although the temple is geographically and visually separate from the rest of the city, it dominates the district and is visible from most points in the district. For anyone entering the district, the temple would have been the focal point, creating a powerful perceptual experience. Spatial analysis of the pathways through the district reveals that they lead not only toward the temple, but around it. This follows patterns observed ethnographically at modern south Indian pilgrimage centers, where shrines are frequently circled on foot before entry. Such circumambulation has great ceremonial significance, defining the boundaries of the sacred space and ritualizing movement through it.

THE QUOTIDIAN LANDSCAPE

Despite the prominence of this very public space, the landscape of the Vitthala district preserved private, residential space. The same pathways that led around the temples for ritual movements also protected residential areas by keeping visitors away. These pathways also protected many resources. Much of the water supply is difficult to access from the main paths that lead to the temple. In particular, there is an absence of public paths leading to the smaller tanks and wells that would have been used for everyday purposes.

While at first glance it would appear that residential areas in such close proximity to major temples existed primarily to serve temples and take care of the pilgrims who visited them, archaeological remains indicate that the activities in the residential areas were secular. In my analysis of grinding stones and ceramics found in these areas, I identified average size mortars and a few large cooking vessels, suggesting that food preparation did not extend beyond the household level. Since the artifacts I found in the private parts of the temple district imply residential, household-level use, they indicate that proximity to temples and ritual spaces did not necessarily impact the residents’ experience of place.

At Vijayanagara, an already dramatic landscape was manipulated to promote legitimacy and power for kings and ritual and worship for devotees, while also maintaining everyday household experiences for non-elite residents. In the shadow of these temples, the physical landscape took on entirely different meanings, depending on the status and perspective of the perceiver. This view into the many landscapes has been made possible by a variety of archaeological and historical data—including inscriptions, ceramics, grinding stones, spatial evidence, architecture, and modern practice. Combined, they contribute to our overall understanding of the site.
Alexandra Mack (right) sorting pottery sherds in the field camp at Vijayanagara.

Alexandra Mack received her Ph.D. from Arizona State University in 2000. She has visited pilgrimage sites throughout India and spent several seasons on site at Vijayanagara. She is currently a Workplace Anthropologist at Pitney Bowes in Shelton, CT.

For Further Reading


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Vendors sell their wares in Hampi bazaar outside the Virupaksha temple complex during the pala puja festival, which celebrates the marriage of the local river goddess Pampa to Virupaksha, an incarnation of the Hindu deity Shiva.