

POLITICAL FORMATION, DISCOVERY AND ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS

Vijayanagara: An Imperial City and Empire

Vijayanagara, literally meaning the “city of victory,” represented both a **magnificent urban centre and a powerful empire** that flourished between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.

At its height, the empire extended from the **river Krishna in the north to the southern extremities of the peninsula**, embodying a vast and diverse political formation.

Despite its grandeur, the city was **sacked in 1565** and gradually fell into ruin. Yet, it survived in popular memory as *Hampi*, a name derived from the local goddess Pampadevi.

The reconstruction of Vijayanagara’s past has depended on a **careful combination of oral traditions, archaeological remains, inscriptions, and literary accounts**, illustrating how history is often pieced together from multiple fragments.

Rediscovery and Historical Reconstruction

The rediscovery of Vijayanagara marks a crucial moment in modern historiography. In 1800, **Colonel Colin Mackenzie**, an engineer and antiquarian, conducted the first systematic survey of the site.

His work relied not only on physical remains but also on **local knowledge preserved by temple priests and communities**, highlighting the importance of indigenous memory in historical reconstruction.

Over time, additional sources enriched this understanding:

- **Photographs (from 1856 onwards)** enabled visual documentation
- **Inscriptions** provided details of political and social life
- **Foreign travellers’ accounts** offered vivid descriptions of the city

Thus, Vijayanagara’s history emerges as a **multi-layered narrative**, constructed through diverse and complementary sources.

Political Structure: Rayas, Nayakas and Sultans

The empire was founded in 1336 by the brothers **Harihara and Bukka**, and encompassed a wide range of linguistic and cultural groups. It was referred to by contemporaries as *karnataka samrajyamu*, indicating its regional roots as well as its imperial aspirations.

Politically, Vijayanagara existed in a **dynamic environment of rivalry and interaction**. It competed with:

- The **Deccan Sultanates**
- The **Gajapati rulers of Orissa**

These interactions were not limited to warfare; they also involved **cultural exchanges**, particularly in architecture, where ideas and techniques were borrowed and adapted.

Economic Foundations: Trade, Wealth and Power

A crucial element of Vijayanagara’s strength lay in its **economic vitality**, especially its integration into long-distance trade networks.

Horse Trade and Military Needs

Warfare in this period relied heavily on cavalry. Since horses could not be bred effectively in the peninsula, they were imported from **Arabia and Central Asia**. This trade involved:

- Arab merchants
- Local trading groups (*kudirai chettis*)
- Later, the Portuguese, who introduced advanced military technology

Urban Markets and Prosperity

Vijayanagara was also renowned for its **thriving markets**, dealing in:

- Spices
- Textiles
- Precious stones

Trade was not merely an economic activity but also a **symbol of prestige**, reflecting the wealth and cosmopolitan nature of the city. The revenue generated

from commerce contributed significantly to the **financial strength of the state**.

The Zenith and Decline of the Empire

The political history of Vijayanagara was marked by **dynastic changes**, moving from the Sangama to the Saluva, Tuluva, and eventually the Aravidu dynasties.

Krishnadeva Raya: The Golden Age

The reign of **Krishnadeva Raya (1509–1529)** is widely regarded as the empire's peak. His rule was characterised by:

- Military expansion (Raichur doab, Orissa)
- Defeat of rival sultanates
- Internal stability and prosperity
- Patronage of temples and urban development



He also emphasised the importance of trade, recognising its role in strengthening the kingdom.

Decline and Fall

After his death, internal tensions grew:

- Nayakas (military chiefs) became increasingly rebellious
- Political instability weakened central authority

The decisive moment came in **1565 at the Battle of Talikota**, where an alliance of Deccan Sultanates

defeated Vijayanagara. The city was subsequently **sacked and abandoned**, marking the end of its political dominance.

ADMINISTRATION, URBAN STRUCTURE AND ECONOMIC LIFE

The Amara-Nayaka System: Structure and Function

One of the most distinctive features of Vijayanagara's administration was the **amara-nayaka system**, a form of military and territorial organisation.

The **nayakas** were military chiefs who:

- Controlled specific territories
- Collected taxes from peasants, traders, and artisans
- Maintained armies for the king

In return, they:

- Paid tribute
- Presented themselves at court
- Demonstrated loyalty through gifts

This system ensured a **decentralised yet militarily efficient state**, but over time, the growing power of nayakas contributed to the **fragmentation of the empire**.

Urban Planning and Spatial Organisation

Vijayanagara was not merely a political centre but also a **carefully planned urban space**, divided into distinct zones:

- The **sacred centre**
- The **royal centre**
- The **urban core**

Its location in the **Tungabhadra river basin**, surrounded by granite hills, provided both **natural protection and symbolic grandeur**.

Water Resource Management

Given its location in a relatively arid region, the city developed an **advanced system of water management**.

Key features included:

- Construction of reservoirs such as the **Kamalapuram tank**
- Use of canals like the **Hiriya canal**
- Building of embankments to store and direct water

These systems served multiple purposes:

- Irrigation of agricultural fields
- Supply to urban areas
- Provisioning of the royal centre

This reflects the **technological capability and administrative planning** of the rulers.

Fortifications and Defence Strategy

The city was enclosed by **multiple lines of fortification**, which impressed contemporary observers. These fortifications:

- Enclosed not only the city but also **agricultural land and forests**
- Were built using **massive stone blocks without mortar**
- Included bastions and well-guarded gateways

A striking feature was the inclusion of **agricultural fields within the fortified area**, ensuring food security during sieges. This represented a **strategic innovation**, contrasting with conventional defensive practices.

Roads, Bazaars and Urban Life

The city's infrastructure facilitated both movement and economic activity.

Road Networks

- Connected gates, temples, and markets
- Adapted to natural terrain

Bazaars

- Located along temple streets
- Sold a wide range of goods, from luxury items to everyday necessities
- Described by travellers as abundant and vibrant

Social Diversity

The urban population included:

- Merchants
- Artisans
- Different religious communities

Archaeological evidence, such as **Chinese porcelain and mosques**, indicates a **cosmopolitan and culturally diverse society**.

PAGE 3: RITUAL POWER, ARCHITECTURE AND CULTURAL LIFE

The Royal Centre: Space of Authority

The royal centre, located in the south-western part of the city, was the **seat of political power**. It included:

- Palaces
- Administrative buildings
- Temples

Unlike temples, many secular structures were built using **perishable materials**, which explains their limited survival.

The Mahanavami Dibba: Ritual and Sovereignty

One of the most significant structures in the royal centre is the **mahanavami dibba**, a massive platform associated with royal ceremonies.

During the **Mahanavami festival**, the king:

- Displayed his power and prestige
- Received tribute from nayakas
- Reviewed military forces

The celebrations included:

- Ritual worship
- Animal sacrifices
- Processions of elephants, horses, and soldiers

These rituals symbolised the **integration of political authority with religious legitimacy**.

Royal Architecture and Cultural Synthesis

Lotus Mahal and Elephant Stables

- Exhibit **Indo-Islamic architectural influences**
- Reflect cultural interaction and adaptation

- Possibly served administrative or ceremonial functions

Hazara Rama Temple

- Associated with the royal family
- Features intricate carvings depicting the **Ramayana**
- Demonstrates the use of religious symbolism in royal contexts

The Sacred Centre: Religion and Legitimacy

The sacred centre, located along the Tungabhadra, was deeply associated with **religious traditions**:

- Worship of **Virupaksha (Shiva)**
- Cult of **Pampadevi**
- Links to the **Ramayana tradition**

The rulers claimed to govern on behalf of the deity, and royal orders were issued in his name. This reflects the **close association between kingship and divinity**.

Temple Architecture and Functions

Vijayanagara temple architecture introduced distinctive features:

- Massive **gopurams (gateways)** symbolising imperial power
- Pillared **mandapas** used for rituals and gatherings
- Long corridors and chariot streets

Key Temples

- **Virupaksha Temple**: Continuously developed and expanded
- **Vitthala Temple**: Reflects cultural integration and architectural innovation

Temples served multiple roles:

- Religious centres
- Cultural spaces for music and dance
- Economic hubs supported by land grants

Archaeology and Reconstruction

Modern understanding of Vijayanagara has been enhanced through:

- Detailed mapping and surveys
- Division of the site into grids for systematic study
- Identification of structures such as temples, roads, and bazaars

However, many elements—especially wooden structures—have not survived. Historians rely on **travellers' accounts and inscriptions** to reconstruct these missing aspects.

