Chapter 7: An Imperial Capital: Vijayanagara

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 What have been the methods used to study the ruins of Hampi over the last two centuries? In what way do you think they would have complemented the information provided by the priests of the Virupaksha temple?

The ruins were first brought to light in 1800 when Colin Mackenzie prepared a survey map of the site. From 1856 photographers such as Alexander Greenlaw began recording the monuments, and from 1836 epigraphists started collecting the many inscriptions found at Hampi (J.F. Fleet documented temple-wall inscriptions from 1876). Historians collated these with the accounts of foreign travellers and with literature in Telugu, Kannada, Tamil and Sanskrit. Through the twentieth century the Archaeological Survey of India and the Karnataka Department of Archaeology preserved the site, and from the early 1980s a major mapping and survey project documented thousands of structures. The priests of the Virupaksha temple supplied living oral tradition and local memory, including the religious significance of the shrines and the derivation of the name Hampi from Pampadevi. The other methods complemented this by adding dated, material and cross-checkable evidence — maps, photographs, inscriptions and excavated remains — which both confirmed and extended the priests' memories into a fuller, verifiable history of the city and empire.

Q2 How were the water requirements of Vijayanagara met?

Vijayanagara lay in a natural basin formed by the river Tungabhadra, with granite hills from which a number of streams flowed down. Because this was one of the most arid zones of the peninsula, elaborate arrangements were made to store rainwater and bring it to the city. Embankments were built across the streams to create reservoirs of varying sizes. The most important tank, now called the Kamalapuram tank, was built in the early fifteenth century; its water irrigated nearby fields and was also carried by a channel to the "royal centre". The Hiriya canal, built by the Sangama dynasty, drew water from a dam across the Tungabhadra and irrigated the cultivated valley separating the sacred centre from the urban core. Paes also described a large tank built by Krishnadeva Raya that gathered water from the hills and from pipes running several kilometres. Ordinary town dwellers drew water from wells, rainwater tanks and temple tanks.

Q3 What do you think were the advantages and disadvantages of enclosing agricultural land within the fortified area of the city?

The chief advantage lay in security during warfare. Medieval sieges often aimed to starve the defenders into submission and could last for months or even years. Most rulers prepared for this by building large granaries within their forts, but the rulers of Vijayanagara went further and enclosed the agricultural belt itself within the fortifications. This meant the city could keep growing food during a prolonged siege, giving it a far greater capacity to hold out, and the enclosed fields, gardens and reservoirs (noted by Abdur Razzaq and Paes between the outer walls) made the settlement self-sufficient. The disadvantage was that this was a far more expensive and elaborate strategy. Enclosing cultivated tracts meant building much longer and more numerous fortification walls, defending a far larger perimeter, and committing greater resources, labour and an extensive canal system to service the land — a heavy cost in money and manpower compared with simply storing grain in granaries.

Q4 What do you think was the significance of the rituals associated with the mahanavami dibba?

The rituals linked to the mahanavami dibba probably coincided with Mahanavami, part of the ten-day festival known in peninsular India as Navaratri or Mahanavami and elsewhere as Dussehra or Durga Puja, held in the autumn months. It was the occasion on which the Vijayanagara kings displayed their prestige, power and suzerainty. The ceremonies included worship of the image, worship of the state horse, and the sacrifice of buffaloes and other animals, along with dances, wrestling matches, and processions of caparisoned horses, elephants, chariots and soldiers. Chief nayakas and subordinate kings made ritual presentations before the king and his guests. On the last day the king inspected his own army and those of the nayakas in a grand review in an open field, and the nayakas brought rich gifts and the stipulated tribute. These ceremonies were imbued with deep symbolic meaning: they legitimised the king's authority, dramatised his overlordship and renewed the loyalty and subordination of the nayakas to the ruler.

Q5 Fig. 7.33 is an illustration of another pillar from the Virupaksha temple. Do you notice any floral motifs? What are the animals shown? Why do you think they are depicted? Describe the human figures shown.

The chapter describes the halls of the Virupaksha temple — including the hall built by Krishnadeva Raya to mark his accession — as being decorated with delicately and intricately carved pillars, so a pillar such as this typically carries fine floral motifs as decorative borders and bands. The animals carved on such temple surfaces are commonly elephants and horses: the chapter notes that elephants and horses appear on the sculpted panels of the Hazara Rama temple as well. They were likely depicted because both animals were central to royal power and warfare — cavalry and war-elephants were vital to the empire, and showing them signalled the ruler's might and prestige. The human figures on such pillars are generally shown in scenes of worship and celebration, such as dancers, musicians and attendants, reflecting the temple's role as a setting for music, dance and ritual performance before the deities. (This is an observation grounded in the chapter's descriptions of Vijayanagara's carved pillars and panels; exact details would depend on the actual illustration.)

Q6 Discuss whether the term “royal centre” is an appropriate description for the part of the city for which it is used.

The "royal centre" was located in the south-western part of the settlement, and in several respects the name fits. It was clearly the hub of royal authority and ceremony: about thirty large building complexes have been identified as palaces, and it contained the most important ceremonial structures — the so-called king's palace, the audience hall and the mahanavami dibba where the king displayed his power during the Mahanavami festival. It also held distinctive secular and royal buildings such as the Lotus Mahal (possibly a council chamber where the king met his advisers) and the "elephant stables", along with the Hazara Rama temple, probably meant only for the king and his family. A feature distinguishing these secular structures from temples is that temples were built entirely of masonry, while the superstructures of the royal buildings were of perishable material.

Yet the term is only partly appropriate. Although designated a "royal" centre, the area in fact included over sixty temples, so it was by no means purely secular — the patronage of temples and cults was itself a way for rulers to legitimise their authority. Moreover, much of our naming is conjectural. The function of the audience hall is unclear because its closely spaced pillars left little free space; the mahanavami dibba remains an enigma, since the surrounding space seems too small for the great processions described; and names like "Lotus Mahal" and "elephant stables" were coined by later British travellers rather than derived from secure evidence. So while "royal centre" usefully captures the concentration of palaces, ceremonial platforms and structures tied to kingship, it oversimplifies an area that also served religious functions and whose buildings are still imperfectly understood.

Q7 What does the architecture of buildings like the Lotus Mahal and elephant stables tell us about the rulers who commissioned them?

The Lotus Mahal and the "elephant stables" are among the most striking secular buildings of the royal centre, and their architecture reveals much about the rulers who commissioned them. Both make prominent use of arches and domes — the arches of the Lotus Mahal were probably inspired by Indo-Islamic techniques, the same style, introduced by the Turkish Sultans, that appears over the fortification gateways. This shows that the Vijayanagara rulers, although they called themselves rayas and claimed to rule on behalf of the god Virupaksha, were open and willing to borrow from the architectural traditions of the Deccan Sultanates and to blend them with local building practices to create a composite imperial style.

The buildings also speak of the rulers' wealth, power and ambition. The Lotus Mahal, with its nine towers (a high central one and eight along the sides), and the large, arcaded elephant stables were elaborate, finely designed structures that could only be built by rulers able to command great resources, skilled architects and labour. By housing and displaying war-elephants — symbols of military might — in a grand building, and by commissioning so refined a structure as the Lotus Mahal (possibly a council chamber), the rulers projected their prestige and sophistication. At the same time, because these names were given by nineteenth-century British travellers and the

exact functions remain uncertain, the buildings remind us how much interpretation rests on later guesswork rather than firm evidence.

Q8 What are the architectural traditions that inspired the architects of Vijayanagara? How did they transform these traditions?

The architects of Vijayanagara drew on a long regional history of temple building that went back to dynasties such as the Pallavas, Chalukyas, Hoysalas and Cholas. Ruling elites in these areas had patronised elaborate temples like the Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur and the Chennakeshava temple at Belur, and the rayas, who called themselves rayas, built on this inheritance. A second major source was Indo-Islamic architecture, introduced by the Turkish Sultans — the arches and domes seen on the fortification gateways and on buildings like the Lotus Mahal grew out of continual interaction between these Islamic techniques and local building practices.

The Vijayanagara rulers did not merely copy these traditions; they transformed and carried them, as the chapter puts it, "literally to new heights". In temple architecture they introduced structures of immense scale that marked imperial authority, above all the towering raya gopurams or royal gateways that often dwarfed the towers over the central shrines and signalled the temple from a great distance. They elaborated mandapas (pavilions) and long pillared corridors running around the shrines, and developed chariot streets paved with stone and lined with pillared pavilions for merchants. Royal portrait sculpture was now displayed in temples, and the king's visits were turned into important state occasions. They also adopted Indo-Islamic arches and domes in their secular and defensive buildings, and brought in deities from other regions, such as Vitthala from Maharashtra — fusing diverse traditions into a distinctive imperial architectural culture.

Q9 What impression of the lives of the ordinary people of Vijayanagara can you cull from the various descriptions in the chapter?

Although little archaeological evidence survives of the houses of ordinary people, the chapter allows us to piece together an impression of their lives. Barbosa described their houses as thatched but well built and arranged according to occupation in long streets with many open places, suggesting that work and residence were organised by craft and community. The urban core had distinct quarters — a north-eastern area where fine Chinese porcelain points to rich traders, and a Muslim residential quarter with tombs and mosques whose architecture resembled the temple mandapas, showing a diverse population living side by side. The whole area was dotted with numerous small shrines and temples, reflecting a variety of cults supported by different communities, while ordinary dwellers drew their water from wells, rainwater tanks and temple tanks.

The travellers' accounts also convey a busy, prosperous urban life. Paes and Nuniz described broad market streets stocked with precious stones, cloth, and abundant, cheap provisions — rice, grains, fruits, and many kinds of meat — making Vijayanagara seem "the best-provided city in the world". Yet ordinary people were also the labourers of empire: Paes wrote of fifteen or twenty thousand men working on a single tank "looking like ants", and the chapter raises unanswered questions about the masons, stonecutters and sculptors who built the great monuments, their wages and origins, and whether common men, women and children could even enter the royal and sacred centres. The overall impression is of a crowded, hard-working and commercially vibrant population whose own voice and living conditions are only dimly recoverable.

Q10 On an outline map of the world, mark approximately Italy, Portugal, Iran and Russia. Trace the routes the travellers mentioned on p.176 would have taken to reach Vijayanagara.

On an outline map of the world, mark the approximate locations of Italy, Portugal, Iran and Russia, and mark Vijayanagara (Hampi) in the Krishna-Tungabhadra region of southern India. Link each country to the traveller named in the chapter: Italy (Nicolo de Conti), Iran/Persia (the ambassador Abdur Razzaq), Russia (Afanasii Nikitin), and Portugal (Duarte Barbosa, Domingo Paes and Fernao Nuniz). Trace plausible sea and land routes they would have followed — broadly across the Arabian Sea to the west coast of the Indian peninsula (Abdur Razzaq reached Calicut) and then inland to Vijayanagara — showing how travellers from Europe and Persia approached the city via India's western ports. Use only the places named in the chapter and keep the routes approximate.

Q11 Find out more about any one of the major cities which flourished in the subcontinent during c. fourteenth-seventeenth centuries. Describe the architecture of the city. Are there any features to suggest that these were political centres? Are there buildings that were ritually significant? Is there an area for commercial activities? What are the features that distinguish the urban layout from that of surrounding areas?

For this project, choose one major contemporary city of the period (for example a Deccan Sultanate capital such as Bijapur, Golconda or Bidar, or a city like Delhi), and gather information from textbooks, encyclopaedias, museum or ASI websites and reliable histories. Describe its architecture and then, using Vijayanagara as a model, look for features that mark it as a political centre (forts, palaces, audience or ceremonial buildings), buildings of ritual significance (temples, mosques, tombs), and a commercial zone (bazaars or market streets). Finally, note what distinguished its planned urban layout — its fortifications, water works and zoning — from the surrounding countryside.

Q12 Visit a religious building in your neighbourhood. Describe, with sketches, its roof, pillars and arches if any, corridors, passages, halls, entrance, water supply, etc. Compare these features with those of the Virupaksha temple. Describe what each part of the building is used for. Find out about its history.

For this project, visit a religious building near your home and observe it carefully, making sketches of its roof, pillars, arches, corridors, passages, halls, entrance and water supply. Note what each part is used for and ask local people or caretakers about the building's history and date. Then compare these features with those of the Virupaksha temple described in the chapter — its gopuram (gateway), pillared halls and mandapas used for music, dance, drama and the marriages of deities, its central shrine, corridors and temple tank — noting the similarities and differences in design, scale and function.