

“As a sapphire . . . to the blades of grass”:

**THE RATIONALITY OF
POLITICS & POWER IN VIJAYANAGAR**

Azim Barodawala
The Lauder Institute, University of Pennsylvania

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Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Aditya Behl

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When the King so desires, he commands a man to be thrown to the elephants, and they tear him in pieces. The people are so subject to him that if you told a man on the part of the King that he must stand in the street holding a stone on his back all day till you released him, he would do it

(Nuniz, 384)

.....

If you really think about it, I myself am nothing more than a worthless piece of grass. Now everyone values a sapphire, which, if it is genuine, attracts grass when it is rubbed. But if the sapphire despise the grass and thus fails to attract it, then it is not a fine sapphire and will have little value. Just like that, a servant is elevated to greatness only through the majesty of the lord who rules him. Similarly, it is only the lord who is surrounded by great servants who will gain fame and renown.

(Wagoner, 1993, 104. Vijayanagar chief minister Salvatinica responding to the king's concern about the minister's level of power in the court)

I. Introduction

The empire of Vijayanagar lasted from the mid 14th until the mid 17th century, and represents the apex of unified Hindu domination over South India. Under the leadership of Krishna Deva Raya, in the early 16th century, the empire controlled nearly all of the Deccan peninsula, and both the Malabar and Coromandel coasts. The empire's prominence made it a stopping point for many international travelers of the day, particularly from Portugal and Persia, and the accounts of these travelers provide students of Vijayanagar with rich primary descriptions of the kingdom, its customs, its history, and its social fabric.

A striking feature of the chroniclers' accounts of Vijayanagar is their strong tone of awe, wonder, and incredulity at what they are seeing. To the writers, the political system seems hyper-treacherous, the justice system inconsistent, the architecture massive, and the ceremonies

completely over-the-top. Though advanced and prosperous, Vijayanagar, according to the chroniclers, did not appear to be a *rational* society. It was the kind of place where a monarch, without much apparent explanation, could have a man “torn to pieces” by an elephant if he so desired. It was the kind of place where the king could make a man stand on the street all day with a stone on his head.

The chroniclers’ tone in their descriptions reflects the oriental despotism lens through which they view the kingdom. Vijayanagar only made sense to the chroniclers in the context of an “arbitrary” and “all powerful autocrat” at the center ruling by fear over the populace. This bias colored the chroniclers’ accounts of Vijayanagar, as they were unable to find rationality in the South Indian kingdom.

The thesis of my work, however, is that understood in the context of the political game being played in Vijayanagar, the society was *highly* rational. The central rule of the game and the defining feature of politics was a lack of a clear principle of succession.. Kings recognized that they could be deposed at any time by any number of aspiring monarchs within the court. Aspirants to the throne realized that they constantly had to be ready to make their move at the slightest hint of weakness from the king. Without a well-defined succession system the political system was extremely fluid, characterized by ever shifting alliances and internal treachery. Understanding the rationality of Vijayanagar’s political and social system is the objective of this work.

I begin this work with an overview of Vijayanagar’s history and a review of relevant scholarship. The goal of the history section is to understand the historical context within which the political game was being played in Vijayanagar, and to highlight the extreme fluidity of politics in the kingdom. The historical overview helps one understand the apparent paranoia

present in the actions of the main players in the kingdom's political game: given the ever shifting political sands the players constantly had to be looking over their shoulders.

The review of relevant literature outlines the major scholarly debates that have occurred in our understanding of Vijayanagar over the past 100 years, particularly the issue of whether or not Vijayanagar represented a South Indian Hindu “bulwark” against the Muslims of the north.

In the following section I examine in further detail the biases and tensions present in the primary sources used in this work. In particular, I examine the concept of oriental despotism which influences the writings of Paes and Nuniz. I argue throughout this work that the oriental despotism view is not the best way to explain what was seen in Vijayanagar, rather a better explanation derives from an understanding of the nature of the political game being played. I also examine religious tensions apparent in both Paes and ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s accounts. I conclude the section by discussing some of the less-than-obvious biases present in the native work *Tidings of the King*.

In Section V, I begin to examine in much greater detail the nature of the political game being played in Vijayanagar. I argue that power and influence is the objective of the game and that the central challenge present in Vijayanagar that fuels the moves of the players is a lack of a clear principle of succession. While a degree of internal treachery would still have existed had there been a clear succession system, I believe that the political game was defined by the fact that most aspirants knew they had a shot at “winning the game.” Given the objective of the game and the primary challenge, I continue by arguing that the key strategy that courtiers and kings used in playing the game was loyalty. As Salvatinica’s quote above demonstrates, kings and servants both had an acute understanding that within the context of the political game being played, both

parties needed one another. Courtiers and kings existed in a mutually dependent relationship, whose primary feature was loyalty.

In Section VI, I examine the primary players in the political game. I argue that six fundamental players dominated the game: kings, ministers, captains, merchants, queens, and aspirants. Of these groups, the kings and the ministers were the most important. With regards to the king, I develop the idea of the bifocality of his power, arguing that he draws his legitimacy from both divine and worldly sources. With regards to the ministers, I argue that they fulfill four important roles within Vijayanagar society: kingmakers, educators, governors, and advisors. I conclude the section with the observation that no matter how powerful any one of the six players appeared, no one player could completely dominate the game. Despite the fact that the chroniclers often viewed the kings in their accounts as “all powerful autocrats,” the reality was that other players within the court – particularly the ministers – also wielded tremendous power. Ministers, captains, and queens all at various points in Vijayanagar’s history played roles in bringing down a monarch.

Finally, in Sections VII and VIII, I examine the roles of architecture and ceremony in Vijayanagar. The central argument in these sections is that the use of architecture and ceremony was highly rational in Vijayanagar, when understood in the context of the political game. Monarchs used grand architecture and lavish ceremonies to reinforce to all players in the game that they were firmly in control. Architecture and ritual also allowed the king to emphasize the bifocality of his power as both a divine and worldly ruler.

II. The Historical Context and Its Importance

Before analyzing the specifics of power in Vijayanagar, it is important to have a general understanding of the major historical periods of the empire¹. Scholars debate Vijayanagar's exact date of founding, however they generally agree that around 1340 CE two brothers – Hakka and Bukka Raya of the Sangama Family – founded the city of Vijayanagar at the site of the present day city of Hampi in Karnataka².

The Sangama dynasty ruled from the founding of the empire to approximately 1485, with the peak of its territorial control occurring in the 1440's under the rule of Deva Raya II. It was during this period (1443) that the Persian traveler 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Samarqandī visited Vijayanagar as an ambassador from the court of Shah Rukh, and commented on its marvels. The Sangama dynasty declined over the next forty years and was supplanted in 1485 by the Saluva dynasty, named after the general Saluva Narasimha.

After another period of instability, in 1505 Vira Narasimha founded the third, and arguably most important, dynasty of the Vijayanagar empire: the Tuluva dynasty. Most scholars agree that the rule of Vira Narasimha's brother, Krishna Deva Raya, between 1509 and 1529 represented the apogee of the Vijayanagar empire. Through multiple military engagements, Krishna Deva Raya was successful in uniting almost all of India south of the Krishna river under his control. Besides his exceptional military success, Krishna Deva Raya was also a strong patron of the arts, commissioning great temples, and promoting literature, music, and dance (Filliozat, 47). Rubiés notes that during this period, the Vijayanagar king became known as “one of the richest in the East” (17). It was also during this period that the Portuguese travelers

¹ Most texts about Vijayanagar contain general information about the empire's history, and I have drawn from a variety of sources in constructing this section.

² The dates provided in this section are approximations, as historical sources tend to differ on the exact dates of different political events.

Duarte Barbosa (writing between 1512 and 1518) and Domingo Paes (writing in 1520) produced their accounts of Vijayanagar. Barbosa was a writer for the Portuguese commercial agents and Paes was a horse trader traveling as a companion of another Portuguese trader, Cristovão de Figueredo.

Upon his death in 1529, Krishna Deva Raya's brother, Achyuta Deva Raya, succeeded him and he ruled until 1542. It was during this period that the Portuguese horse trader, Fernão Nuniz, visited Vijayanagar (Rubiés says Nuniz visited in 1531, others have put the date at 1535), and wrote his descriptions of the empire.

Another power struggle ensued over the leadership succession in 1542, with the regent Rama Raya emerging victorious. The ascension of Rama Raya represents the start of the fourth, and final, dynastic period in the history of Vijayanagar: the Aravidu dynasty. Rama Raya's most important legacy is his provocation of the Deccan sultanates that lead to the total defeat of his armies and the sacking of Vijayanagar in 1565 at the Battle of Talikota. While the Aravidu dynasty was able to keep the Vijayanagar empire alive in a much weakened state for the next 60 years, after Talikota the empire was not a political or military force (Rubiés, 17).

What I hope the reader will take away from the above brief historical sketch is the constantly shifting sands of Vijayanagar's political landscape. In the absence of a clear succession system, the king constantly had to guard against treachery and courtly intrigue. Thus, reinforcement of the king's position at the center of the administrative, architectural, and ceremonial planes was fundamental to the king's success, and displays of loyalty were fundamental to the success of the courtiers. An equally important point is the militaristic nature of the empire. The fact that Vijayanagar was constantly protecting its borders or engaging in

expansion of its own elevated the importance of military might. All travelers to Vijayanagar commented on this militaristic strength.

III. Review of Scholarship

In writing this work I benefited from the many rich sources of scholarship that already exist about Vijayanagar. One of the seminal works on the study of Vijayanagar is Robert Sewell's *A Forgotten Empire*, first published in 1900. Sewell was a British civil servant in Madras, and his work represents the first translation to English of the accounts of Domingo Paes and Fernão Nuniz. The main contribution of Sewell's work, beyond the benefit of making the Portuguese accounts accessible to English readers, was his thesis that Vijayanagar represented a powerful Hindu bastion in South India against the Muslims to the North. According to Sewell, the South Indians were fragmented and weak until they unified behind a strong Vijayanagar leadership, which provided protection from the invading Muslims of Northern India.

Sewell's ideas have been challenged in recent years, most notably by Phillip Wagoner, whose 1996 article "Sultan among Hindu Kings" examines the various ways in which the model posited by Sewell falls apart. In particular, Wagoner looks at men's courtly dress to show the level of influence that the Muslims had on Vijayanagar. Rather than serving as a "bastion," Wagoner argues that Vijayanagar incorporated many aspects of Muslim culture into its own.

Wagoner has also contributed to the understanding of Vijayanagar through his translation and analysis of the *Rāyavācakamu*, which he calls *Tidings of the King*. In this work, Wagoner analyzes a native source of Vijayanagar history. He argues that despite being written after the sacking of Vijayanagar and in the kingdom of Nayaka Madurai, *Tidings of the King* still provides

a useful window to understanding Vijayanagar and the dependent relationships between the periphery and the center.

Richard Eaton's work *A Social History of the Deccan*, also challenges Sewell's assertion that Vijayanagar was a "Hindu bulwark" against the Muslims of Northern India. Eaton looks at the mobility of the elites, examining the Persian influence on the life of the regent Rama Raya. Eaton's fundamental argument, similar to Wagoner's, is that the Northern and Southern parts of the Deccan peninsula were not as separated along Hindu and Muslim lines as Sewell argued.

Joan-Pau Rubiés, a scholar of the history of travel writing, has also made extremely important contributions towards understanding Vijayanagar. In his work *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance*, Rubiés analyzes the accounts of European travelers to Vijayanagar, seeking to understand the political, social, historical, cultural, and religious contexts in which they were written. He uses Vijayanagar as a case study to try and understand the place of travel writing in the Renaissance. One of Rubiés's fundamental arguments is that European interactions with non-European cultures – such as Vijayanagar – had a strong impact on the transformations occurring in Europe between the 13th and 17th centuries.

Finally John Fritz and George Michell, leaders of the Vijayanagar Research Project have made major contributions towards our understanding of Vijayanagar. The archaeologists have spent years excavating Vijayanagar, and have documented their findings in a number of works, particularly *City of Victory* and *Where Kings and Gods Meet*. Their photographs and schematic representations of the major architectural works in Vijayanagar are extremely useful in understanding the scale and significance of the "City of Victory." Connecting archaeology with models of Hindu kinship, the authors have shown the various ways in which "Kings and Gods meet" at Vijayanagar.

With regards to primary sources, I draw heavily on Sewell's translations of Domingo Paes and Fernão Nuniz's narratives, Wagoner's translation of the *Rāyavācakamu*, and Thackston's translation of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Samarqandī's account. It should be noted that other important primary and secondary sources of commentary exist. These include those of the Portuguese traveler Duarte Barbosa (writing between 1512 and 1518), the Venetian merchants Nicolò Conti (writing in 1437 and 1441) and Cesare Federici (writing after the Battle of Talikota in 1566). Secondary accounts include those of the Portuguese Tomé Pires (written between 1512 and 1515) and the Indian writer Ferishta who was based in the Deccan kingdoms and wrote about military engagements with Vijayanagar.

IV. “Decoding” the Narratives: Tensions and Biases³

Before attempting to understand the rationality of Vijayanagar's political system, I believe it is extremely important to take a moment to understand the tensions and biases present in the primary accounts of the empire. Understanding these biases helps one to understand better the lens through which the empire is viewed. I divide this section as follows. I first discuss the concept of oriental despotism, a bias towards the “East” that I believe influences the accounts of the Portuguese chroniclers Paes and Nuniz. I continue by discussing religious tensions present in Paes and 'Abd al-Razzāq's accounts. I conclude by examining the less obvious objectives behind the native sources of *Tidings of the King*.

The primary bias present in the accounts of Paes and Nuniz is that of oriental despotism. Understanding this bias is fundamental to understanding this project. In his work *Text and*

³ I borrow the phrase “Decoding” from Joan-Pau Rubiés, who uses it to describe a chapter in his work “Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance” where he seeks to understand better the social and political order underpinning Vijayanagar

Practice, Ronald Inden summarizes the idea of oriental despotism – a view of the “East” held by certain European observers – as follows:

Despotism, the arbitrary or capricious rule by fear of an all-powerful autocrat over a docile and servile populace, is the normal and distinctive political institution of the East. That elusive mode of production whereby the peasantry of the immense Asian plains, distributed over innumerable, self-sufficient villages, engages in a mixture of low-grade agriculture and handicrafts, makes over to the despot the surplus of what it produces in the form of a tax, subsisting on the remainder is . . . the distinctive economic (and social) institution of the East (35-36).

This view of oriental despotism influences the accounts of Paes and Nuniz, as will be pointed out in this project. The chroniclers’ tones often reflect incredulity, disbelief, and awe regarding what they are seeing. This oriental despotic lens communicates a sense of irrationality that the authors feel exists in Vijayanagar. For Paes and Nuniz, the concept of oriental despotism helps them understand what they see, in essence “rationalizing” the irrational. In this work, however, I will show that this view of Vijayanagar is not correct. The intrigue of the political system, the grand scale of the architecture, and the powerful imagery in the festivals should not be explained in the context of “oriental despotism,” rather in the context of the complex political “game” being played in Vijayanagar. The political and social systems are highly rational once understood in the context of this “game.”

An excellent example of the tone of awe and incredulity comes from Domingo Paes’s account of the *mahanavami* festival, a lavish ceremony held yearly that will be discussed in detail below. The author comments:

I have no words to express what I saw . . . to try and tell of all I saw is hopeless, for I went along with my head so often turned from one side to the other that I was almost falling backwards off my horse with my senses lost . . . truly, I was so carried out with myself that it seemed as if what I saw was a vision, and that I was in a dream. (278 – 279)

While one purpose of this passage certainly is to communicate what he sees, on a deeper level I believe that Paes's is reinforcing the idea of an "all powerful autocrat": the oriental despot. The author, on the one hand, is overwhelmed and excited by what he is witnessing, but on the other hand conveys a sense of irrationality at the spectacle of the event. The idea of being in a "dream" or seeing a "vision" communicates to the reader that what the author is seeing is almost unreal, and that it does not make sense. In my section regarding the importance of royal spectacle, I will contest this bias, arguing that the use of overwhelming imagery made perfect sense in the context of the political game being played in Vijayanagar.

The passage above also reveals certain religious tensions. Joan-Pau Rubiés argues in his work that "Paes only observes, without full participation, because he does not want to contaminate his own identity with idolatry" (243). However, I would argue that the lines are blurred in Paes's accounts between the author's "Christian" beliefs and the sense of awe and wonder he feels upon viewing the display of the monarch's power. The phrase "truly it seemed as if the whole world were collected there" (which the author states while viewing the king's audit of the armed forces), I feel, is not one being made by a writer who is observing "without full participation" in the spectacle of the event. I would argue that the level of enthusiasm and awe present in Paes's commentary is a testament to the power of the *mahanavami* festival, the very power that reinforced the king's role every year as Vijayanagar's divine ruler at the center of the ceremonial plane.

Paes came to Vijayanagar from a Catholic society in which image worship (with the possible exception of saint worship) was not acceptable. At the start, the tone of Paes's narrative of the *mahanavami* festival is mostly matter-of-fact, particularly his descriptions of the image worship performed by the king every morning. Paes's accounts do not appear to be influenced

by his own “Christian” beliefs, as his reports appear to be designed solely to inform the reader (presumably a European) about the religious practices of the Vijayanagar kings. The descriptions are devoid of any type of judgmental commentary regarding the practice of image worship, and the tone is surprisingly respectful. This presents a conundrum. If, as Rubiés argues, Paes did not “want to contaminate his own identity with idolatry,” one would expect that Paes would not pay great attention to the practice in his narrative, or that he would acknowledge the practice with a critical eye. Instead, the very opposite occurs: Paes describes in detail the exact practices of the image worship, in a tone that reflects respect for the devotion that he is witnessing. Why is this? The answer, I believe, has to do with Paes’s inability to prevent himself from idolatrous “contamination.” The sanctity of Paes’s supposed “Christian” beliefs was challenged on a daily basis by the tactile assault on the senses from the *mahanavami* festival. In reference to the image worship, Paes comments “This is what is done during the morning of each day of these nine days, with the ceremonies I have mentioned, and each day more splendid (than the last)” (267-268). There was no “preventing” contamination, as Rubiés believes.

While I am not saying that Paes “went native,” tossing aside his own Christian beliefs to embrace Hinduism, I am arguing that the Paes was not completely detached from what he witnesses. As the festival progresses, Paes’s level of enthusiasm and awe for what he is seeing continues to increase. The author’s characterization of his state of being at the end of the week – “it seemed as if what I saw was a vision” and “that I was in a dream” – cannot be attributed to an individual who is not *deeply* involved both physically and emotionally in the spectacle of the event. Rubiés dismisses Paes’s self-characterization by saying “the shouting and shield-beating of the colorful crowd eventually overstretched his ability to see and count.” I disagree. To

explain Paes's reaction by saying that he was simply unable to "see and count" ignores the tone and the content of the author's narrative. Given the level of enthusiasm and awe, and the superlatives used throughout the narrative, I strongly believe that Paes was participating fully in the spectacle that he witnessed.

'Abd al-Razzāq's narratives also present religious tensions, most interestingly with regards to image worship. While image worship was prohibited in Islam, in India, 'Abd al-Razzāq encountered a culture where the practice was absolutely fundamental. Not only did people worship images and statues, they, in fact, worshiped rulers as the embodiment of God. Yet, by and large, 'Abd al-Razzāq was able to separate his disdain for the practice of image worship from his appreciation for the quality of what he observed, as the following passage indicates:

They venerate cows to such an extent that they rub the ashes of its dung on their foreheads (God's curses upon them) . . .

Within three leagues of Mangalore I saw an idol temple the likes of which is not to be found in all the world . . . In the entrance portico was a statue in the likeness of a human being, full stature, made of gold. It had two red rubies for eyes, so cunningly made that you would say it could see. What craft and artisanship!
(306)

What is most remarkable is that the two passages above appear in consecutive paragraphs, that is to say, in one breath 'Abd al-Razzāq invokes "god's curses" for the Hindu's worship of cows and in the next he admires the craftsmanship of their idols.

In other writings about Vijayanagar's king, its subjects, and its physical setting, 'Abd al-Razzāq again is able to admire despite his views on the beliefs of the people. He eulogizes the king, stating that he is "of perfect rule and hegemony" (307). Of Vijayanagar's citizens, 'Abd al-Razzāq says they "have not equals in the world." (307). He paints an almost utopian image of the city with the following: "In that city there are aromatic flowers continually in

bloom, and as necessary as they deem food to be, they cannot bear [to be] without flowers.” Yet despite these positive comments, ‘Abd al-Razzāq continues to refer to the people of Vijayanagar as “infidels” throughout his account.

How does one go about reconciling these apparent contradictions? Rubiés argues in his work that ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s account is best understood as a means to send a message to his own kingdom about an idealized type of rule:

‘Abd al-Razzāq’s narrative thus went beyond the mere empirical description of human diversity in order to send a political message which had more to do with conditions at Shah Rukh’s court than with those in South India . . . In effect ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s description is also a significant example of the fact that within Islam no less than within Christianity the dismissal of foreign societies on the grounds of incompatible religious ideologies was not a serious impediment to the elaboration of a descriptive discourse on human laws and customs. (24)

Thus, ‘Abd al-Razzāq is able to separate his religious incompatibilities with Vijayanagar from his admiration of the various aspects of civil society because he is using his narrative as an argument for changes within his *own* society. The occasional references to “god’s curses” and “infidels” represent an instinctive reaction to the religious practices he witnesses, not some broader commentary on the theological differences between his own society and Vijayanagar. To take Rubiés’s argument a step further, Vijayanagar represents a political, social, and organizational ideal to ‘Abd al-Razzāq that is not seriously tainted by the religious beliefs of the people. The goal of ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s account is not to criticize the Hindus for their idolatry, it is to criticize his own kingdom for not achieving the same level of advancement that he finds in Vijayanagar.

In understanding *Tidings of the King*, it is important to remember that scholars have dated the authorship of the work closer to the turn of the 17th century. In addition, it is generally assumed that the work was written by an author in Nayaka Madurai, not by an author in the

surviving (though severely weakened) Vijayanagar political system. The significance of this, Phillip Wagoner argues, is that the text in *Tidings of the King*, while providing a window to the past, serves another purpose of reshaping models of dependence and monarchical centrality in Nayaka Madurai. Wagoner argues that Madurai spent many years as one of the periphery states dependent upon the strong administrative Vijayanagar center. Madurai and Vijayanagar had a very strong relationship, and Madurai's rulers understood their position only in the context of a dependence to Vijayanagar:

Nayaka rulers derived their power from their strategic location as intermediaries between higher and lower tiers of the political order. The authority that a Nayaka would exercise over local chiefs and landholders can be constituted only through a relationship of service to a dharmic king at a higher level; Nayaka legitimacy is thus dependent on the status of subordination to the Vijayanagar emperor. (25)

After the sacking of Vijayanagar in 1565, however, the powerful core at the center, to which the Nayaka rulers turned, began a rapid decline. Wagoner outlines how during the period between 1565 and 1600, relations between Madurai and Vijayanagar worsened with numerous conflicts related to payment of tribute (27). As the relationship deteriorated, Nayaka Madurai had to redefine itself in a new context, one independent from its connection to Vijayanagar. *Tidings of the King* is one such attempt at this redefinition:

A primary accomplishment of the text is that it historicizes the relationship of dependence so that it is no longer necessary for Nayaka authority to be constructed through a continuing relationship of present service and subordination to the Vijayanagar throne (30).

I would extend Wagoner's argument to say that *Tidings of the King*, beyond placing the dependent relationship between Madurai and Vijayanagar firmly in the past (and thus liberating Madurai from this dependent link), also serves as a way for the kingdom to define itself as a "new center." *Tidings* focuses heavily on the role of the monarch at the center of the empire: militarily, ceremonially, and architecturally. Perhaps the point of the work is to remind those in

Madurai that for them to be a truly great empire (as Vijayanagar once was), they would need to emulate Vijayanagar by centralizing power and control – militarily, ceremonially, and architecturally – at their center.

V. The Game: Politics, Succession, and Loyalty in Vijayanagar

To understand why politics in Vijayanagar was highly rational, one must first understand the game being played. I divide this section of the work as follows. I begin this section by discussing the context and the goal of the political game in Vijayanagar, arguing that the central objective of all courtiers was to obtain power and influence. I continue by discussing the fundamental challenge which drove nearly all moves of the game: a lack of a clear principle of succession in Vijayanagar. In the absence of a succession process, kings and their primary supporters constantly had to guard against aspirants within the court who wished to topple them. Similarly, political aspirants who wished to win the game and obtain power constantly had to be on the lookout for the slightest sign of weakness from the monarch, in order to capitalize on the opportunity to seize control. I conclude the section by discussing the importance of loyalty in the political game examining the mutually dependent relationship that existed between the various players.

The Context and Goal

The political “game” being played in Vijayanagar can best be understood as taking place on a large board with six fundamental players: kings, ministers, captains, queens, merchants, and a general category which I label “aspirants.” Of these players, the king and his ministers were the central figures; I will examine the role of these individuals in greater detail below.

The goal of the political game being played in Vijayanagar was quite simple: obtain power and influence. Kings enjoyed a tremendous amount of power in Vijayanagar. They were the owners of all lands in the kingdom and the embodiment of God on earth. Kings were at the center of trade, considered the “Lord of the Two Seas,” given their control of the Malabar and Coromandel coasts. Kings were also the head of the military, leading the armies in to battle against neighboring kingdoms – an important role given the highly militaristic nature of the empire. Thus kings occupied a place firmly in the center of the empire’s political, architectural, and ceremonial planes, with all attention focused on them. The king’s chief minister, as will be discussed below, was one of the most powerful individuals in the kingdom. The king delegated many of the administrative responsibilities to the chief minister, and as such he occupied a role of prominence. The king’s captains, who administered various territories within the empire, also enjoyed a high degree of power in their own areas of control. Thus, when an individual in Vijayanagar assumed the throne, he, and all those associated with him, immediately obtained a great deal of power and influence.

The Fundamental Challenge: Succession

The fundamental challenge of the political game in Vijayanagar was that the empire lacked a clear principle of succession. As a result, when monarchs died there were almost always bloody battles among aspiring successors. These battles were just as much between the aspiring monarchs as they were between their supporting courtiers behind the scenes. Existing kings and courtiers – who by virtue of holding the throne had achieved the goal of the political “game” – also had to guard constantly against losing the throne. Winning the “game” was hard enough, however this victory only represented the first half of the battle, the other half being the process of holding on to power in an environment of shifting alliances and highly fluid politics.

The lack of a principle of succession defined Vijayanagar, fueling the moves of the players in the political game.

The Strategy: Mutual Dependence and Loyalty

The chroniclers made it clear that the king was the chief administrator in Vijayanagar, and as such he was ultimately responsible for all aspects of civil society. All within the court – the king’s ministers, captains, wives, and merchants – were only legitimized in the context of the king. All courtiers served at the pleasure of the king; on a whim he could have them dismissed or executed.

In such an environment, one would expect total domination from the monarch. In Vijayanagar, however, an interesting dynamic developed between the king and the courtiers. Courtiers were legitimized only in the context of the king – should the king change, their own position in the court would likely disappear. However the king depended on the courtiers as well. The king ultimately bore the blame if civil society broke down, and faced the potential of losing power. Because of the fundamental challenge present in Vijayanagar politics – a lack of a clear principle of succession –Vijayanagar’s political context was characterized by instability, shifting alliances, intrigue, and treachery. It was crucial for the king to ensure that the affairs of the kingdom (the justice system, the tax system, wars and armies, social services) ran smoothly. Courtiers served as experts who could help the king administer the kingdom. These courtiers, through their knowledge of political affairs, eventually wielded tremendous power in their own right. Since courtiers and kings both needed one another, they co-existed in a mutually dependent relationship.

Loyalty was the “oil” that kept the symbiotic relationship between king and courtier functioning, as Daud Ali describes in his study of courtly practices:

The manuals on polity set out numerous virtues and accomplishments to be found . . . in royal servants . . . But perhaps the most valuable of these qualities for those in royal service, however, was loyalty, usually denoted by the terms *bhakti*, ‘devotion’ or *anuraga*, ‘affection’ . . . Service at court, whatever its transactional reciprocity, was ultimately grounded in personal obligation to a lord and his family. Both in terms of ideology and realpolitik, the measure of this obligation was loyalty . . . Loyalty was crucial as it formed the primary affective basis of the servant/master relationship, at least from the side of the servant (105)

The key phrase in the passage above is “the measure of this obligation was loyalty.” Courtiers in Vijayanagar certainly had their own personal objectives and ambitions for advancement, and therefore a monarch was simply a vehicle for these courtiers to achieve their own desires for power and control. Courtiers viewed monarchs as a means to win the political game. The kings understood this, and recognized that their courtiers would save themselves before saving the king, or even worse would sacrifice the king in order to elevate themselves. Since the goal of the game was achieving power and influence, loyalty was the key tool that the king could use to measure the worth of his courtiers. Those who were loyal were rewarded, those who were treacherous suffered catastrophic and often gruesome fates. Similarly, courtiers could use loyalty to the king to increase their own power and influence within the court. Greater loyalty to the king enhanced the monarch’s power, boosting the courtiers own power and influence, in a virtuous cycle. Thus loyalty – whether through demonstration by the courtiers or recognition by the monarch – formed a fundamental component of the strategy of the political game being played in Vijayanagar.

One approach to understanding the importance of loyalty is an examination of the justice system. By comparing the consequences of common transgressions with those of suspected or actual treachery, we can observe the “premium” that the king places in Vijayanagar on loyalty.

‘Abd al-Razzāq deals with loyalty and intrigue in his account of consequence of a foiled attempt by the king’s brother to assassinate him:

All suspected of having a hand in the affair were brought down. Many were killed, their skins stripped, their bodies burned, and their families reduced to desperation. Even the person who had brought the sour milk as invitation for the banquet was executed. (312)

‘Abd al-Razzāq’s account is notable for its frankness and graphic descriptions. The mental images created by the phrases “their skins stripped” and “their families reduced to desperation” are harsh and shocking. The author could have chosen other language to describe the outcome of this event, however his choices are meant to convey to his audience the drastic consequences in Vijayanagar of disloyalty to the king. The final line of the passage perhaps best summarizes the point ‘Abd al-Razzāq is trying to make. The sour milk had simply been sent around as a form of invitation to the banquet. The deliverer of this milk had no apparent connection to the plot beyond the fact that he was associated with the banquet. Nonetheless, the king saw it necessary to execute him because the mere association with the episode tainted the servant’s loyalty in the eyes of the king.

What makes this passage more powerful is the fact that only pages before the author describes the relative evenhandedness of the justice system:

In the middle of the *chihil sutun* a eunuch called the *dhannâyak* sits on a platform in independent judgment. At the foot of the platform staffholders stand in rows. Anyone who has business comes among the staffholders, humbly presents a gift, places his head on the ground, stands up again and pleads his case. The *dhannâyak* makes a judgment according to the rules that pass for justice in that kingdom (308)

These two passages together provide an interesting contrast in the practice of justice in Vijayanagar. The dichotomy of the imagery the author uses is meant to convey this contrast, and it is highly effective. On the one hand, you have “stripped skin” and “burning bodies,” on the other hand you have “independent judgment” and “rules.” ‘Abd al-Razzāq through these two passages is creating a dual plane of justice in the kingdom – one plane for everyday issues and

another for those dealing with loyalty to the king. Why does such a contrast exist? I argue that it is because the king *must* make an example out of those who are disloyal to him in order to stay in power. The images that ‘Abd al-Razzāq sees of “stripped skin” are equally shocking to him as they would be for any other courtier contemplating backing a coup. The harsh consequences of disloyalty are meant both to reinforce the fact that the current king is in control and to dissuade others from trying to overthrow him.

While severe penalties for disloyalty were meant to reinforce and sustain the king’s power, it is important to note that in the Vijayanagar political game no player, even the king, could push too hard. Ministers, captains, and other courtiers who pushed too hard on the king risked being executed. Kings who pushed too hard on their ministers and captains risked losing their support. As many examples from Vijayanagar’s history prove, should enough of the king’s courtiers rebel against him, he could be deposed. One such example comes from the reign of Virupaksha Raya II:

As long as he reigned he was given over to vice, caring for nothing but women, and to fuddle himself with drink and amuse himself, and never showed himself either to his captains or to his people; so that in a short time he lost that which his forefathers had won and left to him. And the nobles of the kingdom, seeing the habits and life of this king, rebelled . . . so that in his time the King lost Goa, and Chaull, and the Dabull, and the other chief lands of the realm . . . This King had two sons already grown up, who, seeing the wickedness of their father and how he had lost his kingdom, determined to kill him (Nuniz, 305)

The concept of mutual dependence and the interplay between power and loyalty helps explain the outcome. Captains depended upon the kings for their power and legitimacy. A weak king represented a legitimate threat to the captains’ continued prosperity, because such a monarch could become the target of an internal coup which would remove the king (and thus the captain’s source of legitimacy). If the captains preempted such a downfall with their own engineered rebellion – as appears to be the case in this instance – they could influence who became the next

monarch and thus maintain their own power and prosperity. This type of internal “defection,” whether from ministers, captains, or wives, represented a legitimate threat to the king, and further emphasized the need to execute administrative and political affairs with aplomb from the center, while also ruthlessly ensuring that all courtiers remained loyal to the king.

The objective of this section is to examine the complex, multi-party political game being played in Vijayanagar. As one starts to understand the goals of the game and the tools used to achieve these objectives, the system appears to be more rational. Most importantly, it also becomes apparent that no one party, no matter how powerful, can actually control the entire game.

VI. The Players: Kings, Ministers, and Courtiers

Having understood the objective of the political game and the primary tools used to achieve the objective, it is important to understand better the main players involved in the game. The two most important players in Vijayanagar politics – by far – were the king and the ministers. The king was at the center of the administrative plane of Vijayanagar, ultimately he bore responsibility for all affairs in the kingdom. As discussed above, however, he relied heavily on the advice and support of his ministers in order to execute his duties. I begin this section by looking at the king and the various roles that he played within Vijayanagar society. I continue with a detailed look at the ministers, and the ways in which they influenced and impacted the king. I conclude this section by looking at the other major players in the court, namely the captains, the merchants, the queens, and other courtiers. A fundamental concept that must be understood when reading this section is that no one player, despite how powerful they appear,

could control the entire political game in Vijayanagar. As will be seen, kings, though immensely powerful, could still be deposed if they lost the support of crucial courtiers. Similarly courtiers could be executed at even the slightest hint of treachery. The fact that no one player could dominate the game made the political game in Vijayanagar much more interesting.

The King

The central player in the political game was the king. The king drew his power from two very distinct sources: he was both the embodiment of God on earth and the chief political figure in Vijayanagar. This bifocality of power is essential to understanding Vijayanagar as it has an impact on the role of architecture and ceremony in the kingdom. I examine the king's administrative power below through passages from Nuniz, in which the author outlines four important roles for the king: the collector of rents, the center of trade, the center of finance, and the center of justice. I then draw from the work of Joanne Waghorne to understand better the interplay between kingship and divinity in Vijayanagar.

Nuniz outlines the king's roles as chief tax collector as follows:

Within these nine days the King is paid all the rents that he receives from his kingdom; for, as already said, all the land belongs to the King, and from his hand the captains hold it . . . they have no land of their own, for the kingdom belongs entirely to the King (379)

Nuniz is referring to the nine days of the *mahanavami* festival. The phrase – “all the land belongs to the King, and from his hand the captains hold it” – clearly centralizes control with the king, and legitimizes the captains only in the context of the king's power. The implication of this passage is that the captains owe everything that they have to the king. The king is at the political center here, granting territories to the captains in exchange for their service, loyalty, and yearly taxes.

Nuniz describes the king's position at the center of business transactions:

Every merchant who brings merchandise in horses and other things which he may have brought to sell to the King, if he desires an audience, has to offer him a present of a piece of goods or a horse of the best that he has brought, in order that he may obtain an audience and transact his business. (380)

The king is clearly involved in the most important transactions of the kingdoms, particularly those dealing with horses. Given the militaristic nature of the Vijayanagar empire, horses were fundamentally important, particularly because Muslim power in the north was based on mounted archers and cavalry. The fact that the king requires that all transactions be presented to him directly, and that he must receive a present from the potential merchant, underscores the position of the king at Vijayanagar's administrative center.

In another passage, Nuniz describes the king's role as a chief financier in the kingdom. He outlines how the king buys Arabian horses from the Portuguese, and effectively manages his working capital by buying the horses on credit just before the month of September. During September the king receives his annual taxes from his captains, and he provides them with a portion of the horses purchased. At the end of the month, the king pays off his debt to the Portuguese, and as Nuniz says he is able to pay "the cost of the whole without anything going out of the Treasury" (382).

In discussing how civil disputes are resolved, Nuniz once again emphasizes the king's central role:

When any one suffers wrong and wishes to represent his case to the King he shows how great is his suffering by lying flat on his face on the ground till they ask him what it is he wants . . . he makes his complaint to the King; and it is there and then settled without more ado, and the King orders a captain . . . to do at once what the supplicant asks. If he complains that he was robbed . . . the King sends immediately for the captain of that province . . . and the captain may be seized and his property taken if he does not catch the thief. (380)

This passage shows how the king is ultimately the "arbitror of last resort" in the kingdom. It is interesting that anyone can actually present their grievances to the king, if they feel that they

have been wronged (the only question is how long they must lie flat on the ground until they are asked what they want).

The fact that in Vijayanagar the monarch was divine is crucial to understanding his place at Vijayanagar's ceremonial center. Joanne Waghorne, in her work *The Raja's Magic Clothes* provides a useful framework to help understand the interplay between kingship and divinity:

The iconic is deeply implicated in the world precisely because it is by its very nature historical. The "icon" is eminently visible and at the center of power. The king or God in this bodily form is power incarnate, and that power is sustained by his very existence as an icon. (Waghorne, 255)

While the focus of Waghorne's book is a much later time in Indian history (19th century Victorian India), her insights incorporate a longer view. In Vijayanagar, the king is best understood as an "icon" to his people; from the center he was able to project his power out to the empire. However, the "eminent visibility" described by Waghorne only comes about through opulent displays of power and spectacle, and grand architectural works. Such displays were crucial to "sustaining" the king's "existence as an icon," for a number of reasons. First, by reinforcing himself at the ceremonial center of the empire, the king communicated to his courtiers that he was firmly in control and discouraged any acts of disloyalty. The scale of the ceremonies, which always featured the king at their center, were designed to overwhelm the observers, and these displays certainly had this desired effect on the chroniclers. Second, displays of power and spectacle communicated to the people of Vijayanagar that their king and God was strong, in a sense that the "icon" was not tarnished in any way. To extend Waghorne's idea, the king's ability to maintain himself at the ceremonial center enabled him to perpetuate his "existence as an icon," and therefore perpetuate his power. Thus, understanding the bifocality of power and by extension the king's divine role helps one understand the rationality of Vijayanagar's architecture and ceremonies.

The Ministers

While Vijayanagar's subjects turned to the king to carry out the administrative affairs of the empire, unfortunately the king was not often the best person to execute this responsibility. First, and most importantly, he lacked training in administrative affairs. As shall be seen below, given the intense instability present in Vijayanagar, kings were usually "made" by ministers. Monarchs did not train their successors, and most kings assumed the throne extremely ill-prepared to govern. Second, given the king's role as the ceremonial center of the kingdom, the monarch was limited in the level and type of contact he could have with others. With only a very small group of his top ministers could the king interact without an extensive level of formality. In addition, as the ceremonial center the king's days were filled with many activities unrelated to running the government, such as elaborate feasts, sexual engagements with his wives, and vigorous exercise.

The stakes of the game, however, were extremely high. As discussed above in the example of Virupaksha Raya II, kings who did not execute their administrative responsibilities adequately could be deposed by their courtiers. In such an environment, ministers assumed an extremely powerful and central role. The king turned to the ministers – more than any other group – for administrative and political support. Daud Ali, commenting on an earlier period in Indian history, provides a useful commentary regarding the power of advisors that is quite applicable for Vijayanagar as well:

According to the *Arthaśāstra*, all the undertakings of the king were to be preceded by deliberation, and proper deliberation could never be achieved by a single person. It required the advice of counselors . . . These men, appointed by the king and led by the chief counselor or royal preceptor were to be experts on the principles of polity . . . and were to advise the king on a vast range of matters. They furnished the king with one of the three acknowledged sources of power, that of counsel, the other two being might and energy, and were typically called the 'eyes' or even the 'mind' of the king. Ministers were expected to direct the king away from any faulty action which could arise from weaknesses like pride,

anger and conceit. More than this, the counselor was thought to conduct the affairs of the kingdom (56)

Ali's quote demonstrates the criticality of the support from the ministers, citing advisors as one of the three fundamental sources of power for the king, on the same level as "might" and "energy." The king depended upon the ministers for their council and support, and the ministers depended upon the king to provide them with power. As alluded to earlier, the "oil" which kept this mutually dependent relationship running was loyalty. Loyal ministers were rewarded, disloyal ministers were severely punished. In their accounts of Vijayanagar, the chroniclers outline four crucial roles for the ministers that I will examine in greater detail below: kingmakers, educators, governors, and advisors.

Ministers as Kingmakers

The first main role that ministers played was that of the "kingmaker," influencing monarchical succession. The facts surrounding the ascension of Krishna Deva Raya illustrate this role. On his deathbed, the king of Vijayanagar, Krishna Deva Raya's brother, ordered Salvatinica (his minister) to kill Krishna Deva Raya so that the king's eight-year-old son could ascend to the throne. The minister cleverly avoided this task and in so doing made Krishna Deva Raya the king of the empire (and made himself the second in command)⁴. Nuniz's account of the episode highlights the cold calculations that Salvatinica used in determining whether or not to kill Krishna Deva Raya, describing how Salvatinica believed that as a twenty-year-old, Krishna Deva Raya would be "more fit" to be king. Paes even refers to Salvatinica in the following manner:

Salvatinica, who is the principal person that enters the building, supervises the whole [feast], for he brought up the king and made him king, and so the king looks on him like a father. Whenever the king calls to him he addresses him as

⁴ See Nuniz, page 314-315 for a good description of the circumstances behind Krishna Deva Raya's ascension to the throne

“Lord (senhor) Salvatinica” and all the captains and nobles of the realm make salaam to him. (268)

This episode, and the subsequent level of power and respect that Salvatinica achieves, reflects the central role of the ministers as king makers. Salvatinica realized that he would become the minister to whomever became king, whether it was the deceased king’s eight year old son or Krishna Deva Raya. The minister also recognized that in the context of the political game, his power would be directly proportional to the monarch’s power. By backing the “stronger candidate,” he enhanced his own power and position.

The episode serves as another example of the complementary functions of loyalty and power in Vijayanagar. Courtiers such as Salvatinica were highly ambitious and capable individuals, attune to the shifting political landscape. They realized that only one advisor “made it to the top” as chief minister. Aspirants to the chief ministry, therefore, recognized that if they succeeded in overthrowing a king, they could be the next “king maker” and could elevate their own status, control, and power within the empire tremendously. In this way, kings and ministers depended upon one another, as this passage from *Tidings of the King* shows. Salvatinica responds to the king’s protests about the minister’s power as follows:

I must admit that it is just as you say. But why? Because it is your lordship who has entrusted me with the affairs of the throne. If you really think about it, I myself am nothing more than a worthless piece of grass. Now everyone values a sapphire, which, if it is genuine, attracts grass when it is rubbed. But if the sapphire despise the grass and thus fails to attract it, then it is not a fine sapphire and will have little value. Just like that, a servant is elevated to greatness only through the majesty of the lord who rules him. Similarly, it is only the lord who is surrounded by great servants who will gain fame and renown. (104)

This passages emphasizes the mutually dependent relationship between the ministers and the kings (and between power and loyalty). By saying that a “sapphire” has little value unless it is able to attract “grass,” Salvatinica is legitimizing the king’s power only in his ability to attract

and retain “great servants.” Thus, a king who is unable to maintain great servants around him is of “little value.” This is the crux of the quality of mutual dependence viewed in the chroniclers’ accounts of Vijayanagar. As Salvatinica illustrates, a king needs “great servants” in order to succeed on the administrative dimension of the monarchical role. Salvatinica admits to being “entrusted with the affairs of the throne.” The king must trust his advisors to make the best decisions possible for the kingdom. Similarly, Salvatinica recognizes that his worth and “greatness” only comes from that of the king – without the king in power he would have nothing.

Nuniz provides another sharp example of the central role of ministers as kingmakers in his description of the circumstances surrounding the succession of Virupaksha Raya II (ruling from 1465 to 1485), the last king of the Sangama dynasty. As mentioned above, the king’s rule had been marked by a rapid reduction in the territory controlled by the empire; as Nuniz notes “in a short time he lost that which his forefathers had won and left to him” (305). The author describes how the king’s sons decide to take action, with the elder son (and heir apparent) killing his father yet allowing his younger brother to ascend to the throne. The elder brother justifies his decision in the following manner:

‘Although this kingdom may be mine by right, I do not want it because I killed my father, and did therein that which I ought not to have done, and have committed a mortal sin, and for that reason it is not well that such an unworthy son should inherit the kingdom’ (305).

However, reflecting the level of power wielded by the ministers – as well as the legitimate paranoia present in the Vijayanagar court – Nuniz describes what happened once the younger brother ascended to the throne:

And when they entrusted the kingdom to [the younger brother] he was advised by his minister and captains that he should slay his brother because, as the latter had killed his father so he would kill him if desirous of so doing; and as it appeared to the King that such a thing might well be, he determined to kill him, and this was

at once carried out, and *he slew him with his own hand*. So that this man truly met the end that those meet with who do such ill deeds. (306, emphasis added)

The approach Nuniz takes with this passage works quite well though it reveals his bias of oriental despotism. The author sets the account up by painting an almost unassailable portrait of the elder brother, someone who commits a horrible act in the name of saving the kingdom from his tyrannical father, yet has the moral conviction to turn over the kingdom to his younger brother after the act is completed. Given the extensive and elaborate descriptions that follow in Nuniz's account of the trappings and lavish benefits enjoyed by the king of Vijayanagar, the older brother's decision to pass all of this up must not be taken lightly. The quote Nuniz chooses to use portrays the elder brother as extremely morally conscious, as he uses words such as "mortal sin" and "unworthy" to describe the patricide he committed. While readers certainly understands the brother's decision to vacate the throne, we certainly could argue that the elder brother has as much right to the throne as his sibling.

Nuniz then contrasts this quote with a shocking conclusion to the episode – the corruption of the younger brother's opinion of his older brother, and the eventual fratricide that takes place. Again, the question of loyalty is what drives action in this circumstance. Once the advisors have planted the seed of doubt in the king's head about his brother's loyalty (even though the treachery in question is the very act that brought the current king to power!), the brother's fate is sealed. This episode is also a powerful reflection on the paranoia of the advisors themselves, for it is they who convince the king to act. Machiavellian in their analysis of the political situation, these advisors recognize that any elimination of legitimate threats to the king's power will only enhance and consolidate their own control (and marginalize the importance of courtiers who might be supporters of the older brother and wish to become "kingmakers" in their own right). In addition, the fact that the advisors understand that the best way to motivate the king to kill his

brother is to question the brother's loyalty is an additional reminder of the importance that Vijayanagar kings place on this quality. While the younger brother owed his kingdom to his elder sibling, the suspicion of potential treachery was enough to force him to act.

Nuniz's tone reflects a strong level of shock and criticism for this episode, and can be explained given the lens of oriental despotism through which the author analyzes the situation. Nuniz uses this episode to illustrate the irrationality of Vijayanagar, a kingdom in which a king will kill his brother despite the fact that he owns his position of power to his sibling. Given an understanding of the nature of the game in Vijayanagar and the principle players involved, however, I believe that the younger brother's actions are highly rational. First, similar to all the players in the political game, the younger brother desires power. When his elder brother offers him the throne, he (and more importantly his ministers) cannot view this gesture with any other reaction than cynicism, for the elder brother, as well, is a player in the political game. Perhaps the elder brother wants to control politics as a power broker from behind-the-scenes. Perhaps, he prefers to wait for his younger brother to stabilize the political situation before striking and retaking the throne. As the younger sibling's ministers rightly point out, the fact that the elder brother killed his father demonstrates that he is capable of killing a blood relative if he feels so compelled. What is to guarantee that if the elder brother did not approve of the job being done by his sibling, that he would not kill him as well? The fratricide that occurred, therefore, is completely predictable and rational given the context of the political game being played in Vijayanagar. It is not a result of the "oriental despotism" model of government in Vijayanagar, rather it is the logical and rational consequence of the lack of a clear succession system and the importance of power and loyalty within the kingdom.

Ministers as Educators

The second main role played by the ministers is that of “educator,” exemplified in the passage below from *Tidings of the King*. The author describes the level of questions that Krishna Deva Raya has for his ministers on his first day as king:

Now that you have called on me to bear the burden of the kingdom, it is for you to instruct me in the matters of ruling. In what way is the occupant of the Lion-Throne to act? How should he protect the people? How is he to deal with his attendants? How is it that he acquires *dharma*? . . . What are the ways in which he should honor those who take refuge in him and serve him? . . . How does he acquire everlasting fame? You know all this and more about royal conduct, is that not so? Please instruct me in detail! (88)

The quantity and depth of the questions asked by Krishna Deva Raya reflects the fact that in Vijayanagar kings had no preparation for the throne before they assumed their positions. The primary reason for this, I would argue, has to do with the inherent instability of the kingdom. Vijayanagar’s history is filled with examples of relatives successfully and unsuccessfully attempting to overthrow their fathers and brothers. In a kingdom that lacked a clear succession principle, it made perfect sense for the monarchs not to train their successors. In the context of the political game, kings viewed aspirants to the throne as serious rivals. Kings did not train their successors because they believed that by doing so, they would hasten their own downfall, making it easier for their successors to overthrow them. In such an environment, the only individuals who could provide continuity between reigns were the ministers, as reflected by the passage above. The ministers were the ones who would “teach” the new monarchs how to be king. As “teachers” and guardians of the knowledge of courtly and kingly protocol, ministers, therefore, wielded tremendous amounts of power. They played a role similar to that of a sculptor, molding and forming the kings as they desired. The kings depended upon the ministers to help them learn how to rule, govern, and behave, and the ministers depended upon the kings to provide them with social status and ruling power. Both parties benefited from the arrangement.

It is noteworthy that the king perceives the throne to be a “burden.” The cause of this “burden,” I believe, is the responsibility that comes with being the administrative and political center of the empire. Krishna Deva Raya realizes that beyond serving as the ceremonial center, he will now have to attend to the affairs of the kingdom, many of which he outlines in his questions to his ministers. The phrase “it is for you to instruct me in the matters of ruling,” is being made by an individual who recognizes that he will require significant assistance from his advisors to attend to administrative issues of the kingdom.

Interestingly, the first piece of “education” that the advisors provide to the king is that he is God on earth:

First of all, you should know that the King of the Lion-Throne is none other than an emanation of Vishnu (Wagoner, 89)

This raises two important questions. First, does the king truly believe he is “divine,” or is he merely playing the role that his advisors are telling him that he must play? Second, what does it mean to be “divine?” To answer the second question first, to Vijayanagar’s subjects divinity literally means being the embodiment of God on earth. The king, in fact, is a god in Vijayanagar society. I believe that the ministers – as expert players in the political game – cynically view the king’s “divinity” as a vehicle to advance their power. To draw on Joanne Waghorne’s ideas presented above, the ministers realize that while the king’s own power is “sustained by his existence as an icon” (or god), their power as well is tied to the maintenance of this iconic image. This is why the ministers *appear* to be acting as “casting directors,” telling the king that he has been “cast” in the role of God in Vijayanagar society. They emphasize to the king on the first day of his “education” that he is actually god on earth because he must never forget this fact; it is the source of power for both monarch and minister.

Ministers as Governors

The third main role played by the ministers, and the heart of their duties, was that of governor of the kingdom. It is telling that the Portuguese noun Nuniz uses to describe Salvatinica is “regedor,” which derives from the verb meaning “to rule” or “to govern.” As mentioned at the start of this section, while administration of the lands fell under the purvey of the king’s duties, for multiple reasons the kings were not the best individuals to serve as day-to-day administrators.

In such an environment, the ministers played a crucial role as governors of the kingdom, and through their positions had tremendous opportunities to exert power and influence on the king. In a revealing passage from *Tidings of the King*, the author attributes the following quote to the king Krishna Deva Raya:

[Spoken to Salvatinica]: ‘The entire contents of my treasuries, my elephants and horses, all my armies and provinces, my forts with all their bastions, my villages and land – all are in your hands . . . so use them as you will.’ He said this with full sincerity, really meaning what he said. (152)

Other primary accounts confirm this characterization, for example Paes said about Salvatinica “he commands the whole household, and to him all the great lords act as to the king” (250). It is important to note that the king does not say that all the possessions of the kingdom *belong* to the minister, rather he says that the entire kingdom is “in his hands.” This is an important distinction. The king turns to his minister for administrative assistance, however it is never in doubt that as the divine ruler, the monarch himself is the true owner of all the lands, the animals, and the people.

The example of Rama Raya, Vijayanagar’s de-facto ruler from 1542 until 1565, illustrates the pivotal role that ministers played as governors. Upon Achyuta Raya’s death in 1542, a major power struggle ensued when the late king’s brother-in-law (and regent) killed

nearly all of the surviving royal family in order to make himself king (Eaton, 91). The regent was unsuccessful in his attempt due to an intervention by the queens, and Rama Raya, who had escaped from Vijayanagar with the Achyuta Raya's nephew (Sadasiva), returned to the city poised to take control. As Eaton describes:

He [Sadasiva] would now serve as Rama Raya's ticket to supreme power. Abandoning the notion of seizing the throne for himself, Rama Raya arranged for Sadasiva to be formally crowned as king, with himself as regent.

This arrangement lasted until 1550, when Sadasiva tried to assert his own right to rule. In response, Rama Raya simply imprisoned his charge, allowing him to make a public appearance but once a year The final stage was reached around 1562, when Rama Raya discontinued even the formality of allowing the hapless Sadasiva his annual public viewing (92)

This passage raises an important question: why does Rama Raya not choose to make himself the king? Clearly, under the circumstances described above he is completely in control. One explanation, I would argue, has to do with the different roles played by the kings at Vijayanagar's center, principally those of "ceremonial" and "administrative" leaders. Sadasiva, unlike Rama Raya, was a blood member of the Tuluva family. On the "ceremonial" level of government, he possessed a tremendous amount of legitimacy, something that Rama Raya did not. Rama Raya realized this, and wisely decided that he would be much more likely to succeed attempting to serve as the governor of Vijayanagar, helping the king perform his administrative duties, than he would trying to convince the people of Vijayanagar that he possessed the legitimacy to be the "ceremonial" center. He would use Sadasiva's legitimacy as his "ticket to supreme power," to achieve the control he desired.

A more cynical explanation is that Rama Raya simply believed that the ministers were the true power brokers in Vijayanagar's political game, and as such he would be in a better position to exert power and influence as a minister than he would be as a king. Rama Raya may

have realized that given the ceremonial duties required of the divine head of state, he could not simultaneously serve both roles of minister and king. Therefore, should he crown himself, he would have to turn to someone else to assist with the administrative duties of the kingdom while he attended to the ritualistic. Rather than make this sacrifice, Rama Raya might have found it more convenient to maintain a ceremonial “head of state” – Sadasiva – while he actually ran the affairs of the kingdom. That Rama Raya was able to block completely all attempts by Sadasiva to take control demonstrates the power he wielded as minister, and reinforces the important role of the ministers and advisors in Vijayanagar.

Ministers as Advisors

The fourth crucial role played by the ministers was that of trusted advisor to the king. As Daud Ali stated in the passage cited earlier, “Ministers were expected to direct the king away from any faulty action which could arise from weaknesses like pride, anger and conceit” (56). This role is best illustrated by a passage from *Tidings of the King* describing the Gajapati campaign. Krishna Deva Raya had devised a plan to march north towards Ahmadnagar and confront the Gajapati kingdom. After achieving initial success in the campaign, Salvatinica warned the king not to extend further north through the mountain passes due to the large risk of having the supply lines be cut off. Krishna Deva Raya, however, did not listen to Salvatinica, and as a result faced an emergency situation with his army trapped and nearly cut off from his kingdom. At this point, the king turned to his chief minister for advice, and Salvatinica ultimately hatched a plan to extricate Krishna Deva Raya and his armies from their position unscathed (151).

While in the ideal state, it would appear that the ministers are serving as a “moral compass” to the monarchs, “directing” them away from “faulty actions” arising from

“weaknesses like pride, anger, and conceit,” I would argue that the ministers’ actions are better understood in the framework of *realpolitik* and the rules of the potential game, than any obligation to a dharmic ideal. Ministers realized that the “faulty actions” arising from “weaknesses like pride, anger, and conceit” could endanger the entire empire. As goes the empire and monarch, so goes the minister. Krishna Deva Raya’s decisions in the Gajapati campaign – driven, as his enemies state, by “vain pride” – almost cost him the kingdom. Salvatinica certainly provided extremely valuable advice to the king in helping him retreat successfully, however I believe that in helping the king the minister was much more motivated by his own desire to maintain power than he was by any feeling of responsibility to promote dharmic ideals.

Other Courtiers

The Role of Captains

The captains in Vijayanagar controlled regions of the empire and supported the king in military engagements. The captains were at the center of their own mandalas (a concept discussed in greater detail below in the section on architecture), with each of their mandalas connected to the central mandala of the king. While kings were ultimately responsible for all matters of justice within the entire kingdom, as mentioned above should the captains “fail to catch a thief,” their property could be seized as compensation. In addition, as will be seen in the discussion of the *mahanavami* festival, every year the king required all of his captains from around the empire to travel back to the capital city (a journey of up to four months each way) to pay their taxes and more generally to reaffirm their support for the king.

The Role of Merchants

One of the most important commodities in Vijayanagar was horses. Nuniz documents that “the King every year buys thirteen thousand horses of Ormuz” (381). Captains depended upon the king to purchase these horses for them, as mounted cavalry was an extremely important part of the Vijayanagar war machine. Horses were also status symbols; Nuniz describes how the king “chooses the best [horses] for his own stables” (381) and Paes notes how the king “mounts a horse” every morning before daybreak and “gallops about the plain” (250) in a show of force. The Portuguese, through their control of Goa and their trade links with Arabia, controlled the horse trade to Vijayanagar. Both Paes and Nuniz, in fact, traveled to the kingdom as horse traders. This control afforded them a level of access and power within the Vijayanagar court that was as great as any foreigners’. The level of access that both Paes and Nuniz had to the court, as well as their physical location close to the king during such ceremonial events as the *mahanavami* festival (in which those seated nearer to the king were more important), demonstrates the important role that these Portuguese traders played. Horses formed an important foundation of Vijayanagar’s militaristic society, and the Vijayanagar king had little choice but to work with the Portuguese in order to secure this valuable commodity.

The Role of Queens

Queens, as well, fulfilled an important role within the kingdom. Richard Eaton, in *Tidings of the King*, provides an interesting example of an instance when the queens displayed what he calls their “covert power” (91). After the death of Achyuta Raya in 1542, the deceased king’s chief minister, Salakaraja, killed the king’s successor and massacred nearly the entire surviving family in an attempt to consolidate power for himself and become king. The queens, however, stepped in and ordered the ministers and nobles in the city to support Rama Raya, a warrior and courtier who had fled during the massacre and was consolidating his own power

outside of Vijayanagar. Eventually Rama Raya returned and effectively took over control of the kingdom. This episode reinforces the idea that no one party could completely control the political game in Vijayanagar. The queens, seemingly dominated by the king, could, in fact, exert their power and bring down a monarch if they so chose. While the king was the administrative and political center, should he act rashly, his queens could rebel and hasten his downfall.

The Role of the Aspirants

While the focus of the chroniclers' accounts naturally falls on the king in power and the courtiers who support him, it is fundamental to realize that the court included a number of aspirants, who were also important players in the political game. These individuals principally included all members of the royal family (the king's brothers, his sons, his nephews) and their advisors.

The aspirants had one central goal: to achieve power. Given the lack of a clear succession system – the fundamental characteristic driving the political game in Vijayanagar – aspirants had legitimate opportunities to achieve this goal. The aspirants recognized, however that they had to be extremely careful in attempting to obtain power. If they pushed too hard against the monarch, they would be executed for treachery. The moment the monarch displayed any signs of weakness, however, the aspirants had to act quickly since only one individual (and his advisors) could “win” the game and take over the monarchy. In such an environment, it was vital for the king to take every opportunity possible to demonstrate that he was in control of the kingdom. Grand displays of monarchical power such as the *mahanavami* festival, therefore, should be understood as a method for the king both to reassure his own advisors that he was in control and to warn the aspirants not to attempt to overthrow him. The behind-the-scenes

intrigue and plotting, also noted in the chroniclers' accounts, can be understood in the context of the political game, as aspirants had to be constantly prepared to make their move should the monarch falter.

To summarize this section, there were six important players in the political game in Vijayanagar: kings, ministers, captains, merchants, queens, and aspirants. Of these players, the king and the ministers were the most important. Kings drew their power from two fundamental sources, the divine and the worldly. Ministers served four important roles in Vijayanagar society: kingmakers, educators, governors, and advisors. A central idea developed in this section is that in the context of the political game being played in Vijayanagar, no one player – despite how powerful they appeared – could push too hard. Kings who pushed too hard against their ministers and captains risked being deposed. Ministers and captains who pushed too hard against the king risked being executed. Over eager aspirants who attempted to overthrow the king would be killed for treachery. In Vijayanagar's complex political game, no player could totally control the board. Thus, given the nature of the game and the motivations and characteristics of the players, the demonstrations of power and control viewed by the chroniclers – whether administrative, architectural, or ceremonial – are best explained not in the context of the idea of oriental despotism, but rather in the context of the reality of politics in Vijayanagar.

VII. The Spaces: The Role of Architecture in Vijayanagar

Beyond occupying the center of Vijayanagar's administrative plane, the king also occupied the center of the architectural plane. While the tone of the chroniclers communicates a sense of awe and irrationality at the scale of the architectural works in Vijayanagar, I argue that

this grand scale was an extremely important aspect of the political game being played. Monarchs used architecture to emphasize their dual sources of power: worldly and divine. In order to understand the role of architecture in Vijayanagar better, I divide the next section of this work as follows. I first discuss the relationship between possession of the capital of Vijayanagar and divine legitimacy, elaborating on an idea developed by Phillip Wagoner in his work *Tidings of the King*. Wagoner calls the city of Vijayanagar a “Talisman of Authority,” arguing that possession of Vijayanagar’s physical space legitimized the king and endowed him with tremendous power. An extension of this concept is the idea of the king at the center of his own mandala in Vijayanagar, with dependent mandalas headed by his captains all connected to him. I draw on Fritz and Michell to explore this idea further. In the remaining part of the section, I examine specific architectural aspects of Vijayanagar in order to understand how the king’s divine and worldly roles fused through the use of architecture.

One of the key ideas developed by Phillip Wagoner in *Tidings of the King* is that the physical city itself served as a source of power for the king. The City of Victory was seen to be sacred, endowed with the blessings of Lakshmi (who agreed to reside there for 360 years) and the curse against the monkey king Vali (Wagoner, 37). Given the sacrality of the city itself, the simple possession of the city was a source of power and authority for the kings. Wagoner argues that in part, *Tidings of the King* is used by the Madurai kingdom to contrast their present day situation (at the start of the 17th century, with the Vijayanagar monarchs not in possession of the City of Victory) to a time when the city was firmly in control of the monarchs. This contrast delegitimizes the early 17th century Vijayanagar rulers, and provides an argument for why the Madurai kings should assert their independence.

A powerful example of why the king needs to be at the spatial and architectural center of the city comes from an episode related in *Tidings*. The author relates how the king, Krishna Deva Raya, in an attempt to assert his independence from his ministers left the city to meditate at a nearby temple. When his chief minister Salvatinica discovers that the king is missing the next morning, he immediately orders all the captains to leave the city, and he reveals to no one except his spies that the king is unaccounted for. When Salvatinica finally finds the king, he confronts him as follows:

Your lordship, is it proper that you should leave the city and come here like this? If your subordinates had heard of this, the city would have been lost! If the swordsmen were to hear of it, what a disgrace it would be! (Wagoner, 103)

Wagoner argues that when Salvatinica says “the city would have been lost” he is referring to the possibility that aspirants would take advantage of the fact that the king was missing to overthrow the monarch and assume the throne (48). In this sense, possession of the capital is enough to merit the monarchy: a king can only be a king if he is perceived to be in control of the sacred City of Victory. A king perceived, either by his general subjects or by his courtiers, not to have control of the city loses his monarchical legitimacy. Thus, the king *had* to be at the center of the architectural and spatial plane in the empire in order to maintain his power and authority.

Fritz and Michell, in their work *City of Victory* analyze the ways in which the king occupies the center of Vijayanagar’s architectural plane:

[Shastras] codify the layouts of capital cities, defining the appropriate spatial framework in which kings and gods may meet. Such theoretical models create urban images for the perfect Hindu society. They prescribe the distribution of all social groups within ideal royal cities, locating the ruler at or near the center of his capital . . . This spatial ordering of the human world always refers to a central god.

The regulating model for royal Hindu cities in India is the mandala, the geometric pattern which represents the order of the universe . . . The mandala provides a scheme by which human society and cosmic forces are coordinated within a

single spatial system. Here, king and god share a common central location. The power of the presiding deity is manifested inside the mandala, and his protective influence emanates outward in all directions. (15)

The city of Vijayanagar represents the epicenter of power in the kingdom, and the center of the monarch's mandala. The king's captains as well have their own mandalas. These mandalas link back to the central mandala through acts of patronage, responsibility, and respect, such as the tributes paid at the *mahanavami* festival (examined below), the responsibility of the captains to fight with the king when he goes to war, or the act of paying respect to the king through *salaam*. Vijayanagar, the "City of Victory," is the central mandala which controls all others.

The king's position at the center of Vijayanagar's architectural plane endowed him with an important degree of legitimacy and power. Architecture was also used in many ways to link king and god, reinforcing the monarch's divine position in Vijayanagar society. The spatial layout of Vijayanagar⁵ indicates distinct royal and sacred centers linked by a processional avenue, supporting the idea of the bifocality of the king's power as both a divine and a worldly ruler. While the bifocality certainly exists, Fritz and Michell note in their work *City of Victory*, that "king and god share a central location" in Vijayanagar. The authors provide numerous examples to support their argument.

The first example has to do with the spatial layout of the royal center⁶. At the "the most powerful point within the conceptual mandala of the city" (Fritz and Michell, 16) – the center of the royal center – lies not a palace but a temple. The Ramachandra temple⁷, according to the authors, is linked to the royal world through its location in the middle of the royal center of the city. All roads within the royal center converged on this one focal point. The temple's function

⁵ See Exhibit 1 for a general layout of Vijayanagar, including the main centers of the city.

⁶ See Exhibit 2 for the layout of Vijayanagar's royal center.

⁷ See Exhibits 3 and 4 for exterior and interior views of the Ramachandra temple. See also Exhibit 2 for the location of the temple in relation to the royal center's other structures and palaces.

as a center of worship serves as an important link between the divine and the royal worlds, and its adornments, as well, reflect a fusion of the worldly and the divine. On the outside of the temple, the carvings depict scenes from the everyday life of the court. On the inside of the temple, however, the decorations reflect Hindu legends. In this way, this one piece of architecture within the city embodies the dual role the monarch plays as king and god. Control of Vijayanagar implies control over the mandala, with the temple, linking the king with god, at its center. In this way, possession of the city firmly connects the monarch with the divine.

Fritz and Michell also note how the design of traffic patterns within the city reinforced the king's divinity. The act of circumambulation in a clockwise direction was seen as a way to pay homage to the king or god. Streets in Vijayanagar as well as the layouts of temples and buildings were designed to promote this type of movement. Carvings inside of the temples, which depicted important stories and legends, always proceeded in a clockwise direction.

Architecture and spatial location was also used to communicate power within Vijayanagar, and reinforce the king's central position on the ceremonial plane (the subject of the next section). During the most spectacular yearly celebration, the *mahanavami* festival, a large pavilion was erected on top of the multistoried platform in the city's royal center⁸. From this pavilion, the king and his guests observed the lavish events of the festival. 'Abd al-Razzāq commented about this structure:

In the foreground of the field was a *chihil sutun* with nine arches decorated with perfect subtlety, and the king's throne was placed in the fifth arch. My place was in the seventh arch. Aside from my companions, everyone else was expelled from the arch (313)

The author's narrative evokes images of perfection and symmetry at the center of Vijayanagar itself. This instance is an excellent example of how the architectural and ceremonial planes

⁸ See Exhibits 5 and 6 for views of the Multistoried platform used during the *mahanavami* festival. See also Exhibit 2 for the location of the platform in relation to other structures in the city's royal center.

intersect in Vijayanagar. The king uses architectural and spatial positioning to reinforce his role as Vijayanagar's ceremonial center during the most important event of the year. He communicates to his subjects that everything around him occurs to glorify and satisfy him. The divine ruler sits at the center of perfection.

In addition, it is important to note how 'Abd al-Razzāq contextualizes himself in spatial reference to the king. Immediately after stating the location of the king, he states his own location in the "seventh arch," only two over from the monarch. In addition, he emphasizes the fact that only he and his companions were allowed in his arch, and that "everyone else was expelled." Just as in modern times West Wing staffers measure their importance by counting the steps from their offices to the Oval Office, so too did courtiers and ambassadors measure their relative importance in Vijayanagar in closeness to the king. The important fact, however, is that the king was always at the center, power was always measured in relation to the distance from him.

A final set of structures worth examining, for their sheer size and magnificence are the elephant stables⁹. 'Abd al-Razzāq writes that "although the king has many elephants throughout the kingdom, they keep his great elephants at court" (309). Fritz and Michell's schematics reveal eleven enormous bays each housing one elephant. The choice of 11 stables once again demonstrates the importance of symmetry in Vijayanagar. Similar to the arches constructed for the *mahanavami* festival, the elephant stables are designed to focus attention towards the center. In this case, presumably the elephant in the center stable is the one that 'Abd al-Razzāq states is the king's favorite, a large white elephant "with albino spots," whose sight the king believes is a "good omen." As can be seen from the schematics, the domes are also perfectly symmetrical.

⁹ See Exhibit 7 for the schematics of the elephant stables. I would have included a photograph, however the photo was too large for the scanner!

The elephant stables serve as a reminder of the importance of symmetry in Vijayanagar architecture, and the ways in which Vijayanagar structures all drew attention towards a central mode representing either the monarch or that which pleased him.

The main point of this section is to understand better why it was important for the king to occupy the architectural center of Vijayanagar, and the various ways in which the king achieved this goal. The king drew power and authority through his control of the physical city of Vijayanagar; should he fail to occupy the center of the architectural plane he would lose his legitimacy. Architecture also provides an interesting means for the king to fuse his dual roles in society of monarch and God, and the interconnectedness of temples and palaces witnessed within the royal center of Vijayanagar is a strong example of this relationality. Architecture in Vijayanagar, therefore, should be viewed as a highly rational means for the king to reinforce his own power and communicate to all the other players that he was firmly in control of the political game.

VIII. The Rituals: The Role of Ceremony in Vijayanagar

The third plane on which the king occupies the center in Vijayanagar is the ceremonial and ritualistic, and it is here, undoubtedly, that the king's role as witnessed by the chroniclers is most spectacular and opulent. The chroniclers' tone of incredulity and awe is most apparent in their accounts of the rituals. The writers view what they see through the lens of oriental despotism, that is to say what they see makes sense to them in the context of an "all-powerful autocrat" at the center commanding those around him. As opposed to an oriental despotism model, I argue in this section that the festivals should be understood in the context of the political game being played in Vijayanagar. The grandest of Vijayanagar's rituals, the yearly

mahanavami festival, in particular, was designed to overwhelm the senses and communicate to all players within Vijayanagar that the king was in command. All the opulence, all the spectacle, all the ceremony makes perfect sense when understood in this framework.

I divide the section as follows. I first draw on the accounts of Domingo Paes to describe the details of the *mahanavami* festival. It is during this festival, more than any other period, that one can best observe the king's role at Vijayanagar's ceremonial center. The king reinforces his position as the ceremonial center to strengthen his administrative legitimacy, reminding all captains and courtiers that he is firmly in control. I conclude the section by looking at passages from Nuniz and 'Abd al-Razzāq, examining how their narratives, as well, reinforce the king's ceremonial centrality.

The largest ceremony of the year, and the one which most reinforced the king's position at the center of Vijayanagar's ceremonial plane, was the *mahanavami* festival. The festival occurred at the end of the rainy season, during the month of September, and lasted for nine days. Beyond its purpose of highlighting the king's central ceremonial role in the kingdom, the festival also had religious, political, and financial meaning (Fritz and Michell, 32). On a religious level, the festival marked the victory of the god Rama over the demon Ravana. On a political level, the festival marked the beginning of the kingdom's yearly military campaigns, and was designed to celebrate victory and "infuse the royal throne and weapons with cosmic energy" (Fritz and Michell, 32). On a financial level, the festival represented an infusion of funds into the kingdom's treasury, as all the captains were required to pay their taxes to the king.

Domingo Paes provides the most complete and detailed descriptions of the daily activities of the festival. As mentioned above, the festivities took place in the royal center of Vijayanagar. On the top of a large flat, multistoried platform, workers constructed an additional dais and

arches where the king sat. Every morning, the king occupied himself with religious worship. He worshipped an idol in a sacred room on the platform and witnessed the sacrifice of sheep and buffaloes (266-267).

The afternoon festivities started at approximately 3 pm, according to Paes. At that time the wrestlers, women dancers, nobles, and others entered the main arena area in front of the large multistoried platform and arranged themselves. After everything was arranged, the king entered and sat down on the dais, accompanied by other dignitaries. Paes describes the king's opulent dress as such: "there the king sits, dressed in white clothes all covered with (embroidery of) golden roses and wearing his jewels – he wears a quantity of these white garments" (269).

At this point, the captains entered, paid their respects to the king, and took their positions. Paes is extremely careful to note that most attendees of the festival are forced to stand, only being allowed to sit if the King desires: "the wrestlers seat themselves on the ground, for these are allowed to remain seated, but no other, howsoever great a lord he be, except the king so commands" (269). Once all the captains entered, the women began to dance, and Paes marvels at the opulence of their dress:

Who can fitly describe to you the great riches these women carry on their persons? - collars of gold with so many diamonds and rubies and pearls, bracelets also on their arms and on their upper arms, girdles below, and of necessity anklets on the feet (270)

Once the dancing concludes Paes describes spirited matches between the wrestlers that take up the rest of the afternoon (271).

After sunset, Paes notes that workers light torches "in such a way that the whole is as light as day" (271). The evening's activities continued with feasts, plays and other performances designed to please the king. 'Abd al-Razzāq, in his account, marvels at the tricks performed by the entertainers. He describes how an elephant climbed boxes stacked by the performers,

balancing itself on the top box on only one foot and raising and lowering its trunk to the beat of the music (314). This part of the daily festivities closed with an elaborate display of fireworks.

Next, the king's horses entered and conducted two laps around the arena before, as Paes notes, "placing themselves in the middle of the arena . . . all facing the king" (274). Paes then describes in great detail the entrance of the queens' maids of honor. He focuses on their opulence, particularly their "fine silk cloths," their "jewels of gold very richly set with many emeralds and diamonds" and the lamps they carry in "vessels of gold each as large as a small cask of water." Paes comments "who is he that could tell of the costliness and the value of what each of these women carries on her person?" (274). The evening concludes with the departures of the women, the horses and elephants, and finally the king.

These activities were repeated each of the nine days and Paes' descriptions of the festival build to a grand crescendo, culminating in his description of the king's audit of his armed forces, an event that took place immediately upon the conclusion of the festival:

Thus accompanied the king passed along gazing at his soldiers, who gave great shouts and cries and struck their shields, the horses neighed, the elephants screamed, so that it seemed as if the city would be overturned, the hills and valleys and all the ground trembled with the discharge of arms and musquets; and to see the bombs and fire-missiles over the plains, this was indeed wonderful. Truly it seemed as if the whole world were collected there (278-279).

The passage above accomplishes the goal of conveying the king's power through the use of awe-inspiring imagery. Paes elevates the king beyond the commander in chief of all subjects in his kingdom, to the commander of all creatures: as the king rides by not only do all his soldiers respond but his horses "neigh" and his elephants "scream." Even the "ground trembles" upon the king's observation. There is no doubt from these descriptions that the king is God, at the center of the Vijayanagar's "ceremonial plane" and seemingly to Paes, the center of the "whole world." To Paes, the king is the "all powerful autocrat" of the oriental despotism model.

In understanding the motivations of the king in staging such a grand finale to the festival, it is important to remember the mutually dependent relationship between the courtiers and the monarch. The king used overwhelming spectacle and powerful ceremonial imagery to communicate to his nobles, captains, subjects, and animals that he was firmly in command, and that their recognition of him as their God (and ceremonial center) was not misplaced. Here, the king is immensely powerful. While the act of assessing the armed forces may, at first blush, appear mundane and “administrative” in nature, it is anything but that in this instance. The king uses this audit as an opportunity to remind the entire kingdom that he is firmly in control at the center.

Unpacking Paes’s narrative of the *mahanavami* festival reveals the ceremonial centrality of the king in many other ways. In terms of spatial orientation within the arena, the author notes repeatedly that the king is at the center of all activities, whether procession or performance. Paes even notes that when the horses enter they all line up “facing the king.” Performances center around the king; as Paes describes “artists only approach where the king is and then go out” (271). The fact that no lord “howsoever great he be” can sit down without the permission of the king emphasizes the king’s centrality to the event, and indeed his power in the entire empire.

One ceremonial activity, which appears repeatedly in Paes’s narrative, is that of *salaam*. The word “salaam” in Arabic means peace, and is usually associated with a respectful form of greeting. It’s quite interesting that this word was used by Paes in his description, and supports Phillip Wagoner in his argument that the kingdom of Vijayanagar was not – as Robert Sewell argued – a Hindu “bastion” against Muslims from Northern India, but rather a kingdom that incorporated many Islamic influences, in this case language:

[In the morning]: As soon as he is here all the captains and chief people come and make their salaam to him (267)

[*Before the start of the afternoon festivities*]: After all this is done and arranged the king goes forth and seats himself on the dais I have mentioned, where is the throne and the other things, and all those that are inside make their salaam to him . . . the captains . . . make their entrance . . . they approach and make their salaams to the king (269 - 270)

[*At night*]: When these women retire the horses also go, and then come the elephants, and after making their salaam they too retire (274)

The fact that a respectful, ceremonial, gesture like the salaam is fundamental to the start or finish of any activity in Vijayanagar further shows the centrality of the king on Vijayanagar's ceremonial plane. It's interesting to note that even animals such as elephants, trained by their masters to lift their trunks, make "salaam" to the monarch. Clearly the king is the "icon" described by Waghorne above, using his position as the ceremonial center to underscore his own power. By forcing his captains, in particular, to make salaam to him, the king is emphasizing his centrality and reminding his captains that their legitimacy and power only comes within the context of the monarch himself.

Nuniz's detailed accounts of the *mahanavami* festival also centralize the king in a ceremonial context, emphasizing the role of pleasure: "In this way during these nine days they are compelled to search for all things which will give pleasure to the king" (378). The quoted passage immediately follows a discussion regarding the entrance of the king's most "beautiful" wives at the festival. Thus, the immediate subject of the statement ("they") could be interpreted to mean the king's wives, however I believe that the word "they" extends further to include all those who partake in the festival: the king's ministers, his captains, and his subjects. The "pleasure" to which Nuniz refers is the greater pleasure that the king receives from the event: monetary, gastronomical, and of course sexual. Though his approach differs from Paes's, Nuniz nevertheless still reflects the centrality and power of the king through his discussion of the

festival. Nuniz's narrative emphasizes the role of the king as a divine ruler, with all subjects finding a way to "please" him. Similar to the other chroniclers, Nuniz places the king firmly at the center of the kingdom, with all attention focused on him.

'Abd al-Razzāq, as well, dedicates a section of his narrative to the *mahanavami* festival, in which he discusses the ceremonial centrality of the king:

The king of Vijayanagar ordered that from all his realms, which would take three or four months to cross, the leaders and chieftains should come to court. They brought a thousand elephants roaring and raging like mountains and thunderclouds, adorned with weaponry and embellished with howdahs, with acrobats and pyrotechnists (313)

The image evoked is of a powerful force at the center drawing in his subordinates from around the empire, as a large magnet draws in all smaller magnets to the center. By quantifying the time it takes to cross the empire ("three or four months" each way) 'Abd al-Razzāq is demonstrating the king's reach (or to continue the analogy above, the "strength" of the magnetic field). What allows the king to be able to place such onerous demands on his captains, forcing them to come to the center every year to pay tribute (both financially and socially)? The answer, I argue, has to do with the king's role as the divine ruler, and by extension is ceremonial legitimacy. The divine role provided the king with tremendous legitimacy in the eyes of the Vijayanagar people: he was the embodiment of God on earth. A captain seen to be disobeying the king by not attending the ceremony would be disobeying God in the eyes of people. A disobedient captain would be quickly replaced (and probably killed for treachery), and this action, in the eyes of the Vijayanagar public would be in perfect harmony with the dharmic ideas of the kingdom.

A reader of 'Abd al-Razzāq's account has to wonder, however, *why* the king would "order" his leaders to spend up to 66% of their time every year attending this festival. Wouldn't

their time be better spent in their districts, protecting the citizens from attack and attending to other administrative matters?

There are two ways to approach this question. First, the *mahanavami* festival serves as a reinforcement of the centrality of the king in Vijayanagar. The king orders the captains to come to the center because he can. Given the unstable nature of the political game in Vijayanagar, it was tremendously important for the king to remind the captains that he was firmly in control. The overwhelming ceremonial imagery witnessed by chroniclers like Paes and ‘Abd al-Razzāq served to remind the Vijayanagar public that the king was God, and to reemphasize to the captains that the king possessed this divine legitimacy. Thus, this festival, for the king represents *control* and *power*. If loyalty was the fundamental strategy of the game, then the king’s ability to wield and demonstrate power was a fundamental component in his ability to generate loyalty from his advisors and his captains. If the captains believed for one instant that the king had started to lose his divine legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the king would lose their support. The captain’s presence at the *mahanavami* festival, therefore, was necessary as a measure to prevent treachery and to remind the captains that the king continued to occupy firmly the position of divine ruler in Vijayanagar. By witnessing the king as the *ceremonial* center, the idea of him at the *administrative* and *power* centers was also reinforced.

The second reason why the king mandated his captains to attend the festival has to do with simple *realpolitik*. The king (and most importantly his ministers) recognized the tremendous political instability in Vijayanagar. By requiring his captains to spend so much time in travel to and from the “center,” the king prevented his captains from establishing strong power bases of their own. This mitigated the threat of a serious challenge to his power.

The objective of this section is to illustrate how the *mahanavami* festival made sense in the context of the political game being played in Vijayanagar. While the tone of incredulity and awe in the chroniclers' accounts reveals a bias of oriental despotism, I argue that a better explanation for what they are seeing is the fact that the king must use overwhelming imagery to reinforce the dual aspects of power he commands from the center: the divine and the worldly. The accounts of the chroniclers of the *mahanavami* festival illustrate the ways in which the entire ceremony revolved around the king. The festival provided the king an excellent opportunity to remind his captains, courtiers, and subjects that he was firmly in control of the empire, and to reinforce his own position as the ceremonial center.

IX. Conclusion

A fine place to end is at the beginning. I started this project with a quote by Fernão Nuniz that I felt best captured the perceived irrationality in the accounts of the Portuguese travelers. After reading that quote, one hopes that he is not the poor soul who is either thrown to the elephants "if the king so desires" or made to stand in the street for the entire day holding a stone on his back.

The central conclusion of my work, however, was that when understood in the context of the political game being played, Vijayanagar society was highly rational. By throwing a man to the elephants or making a subject stand in the street the entire day holding a stone on his head, the monarch reinforced his power and control at the administrative center of the empire. Such reinforcement was vital given the central characteristic of the political game: the lack of a clear principle of succession. Displays of monarchical power signaled to other players that the king was firmly in control, and dissuaded aspirants from trying to overthrow the monarch. These

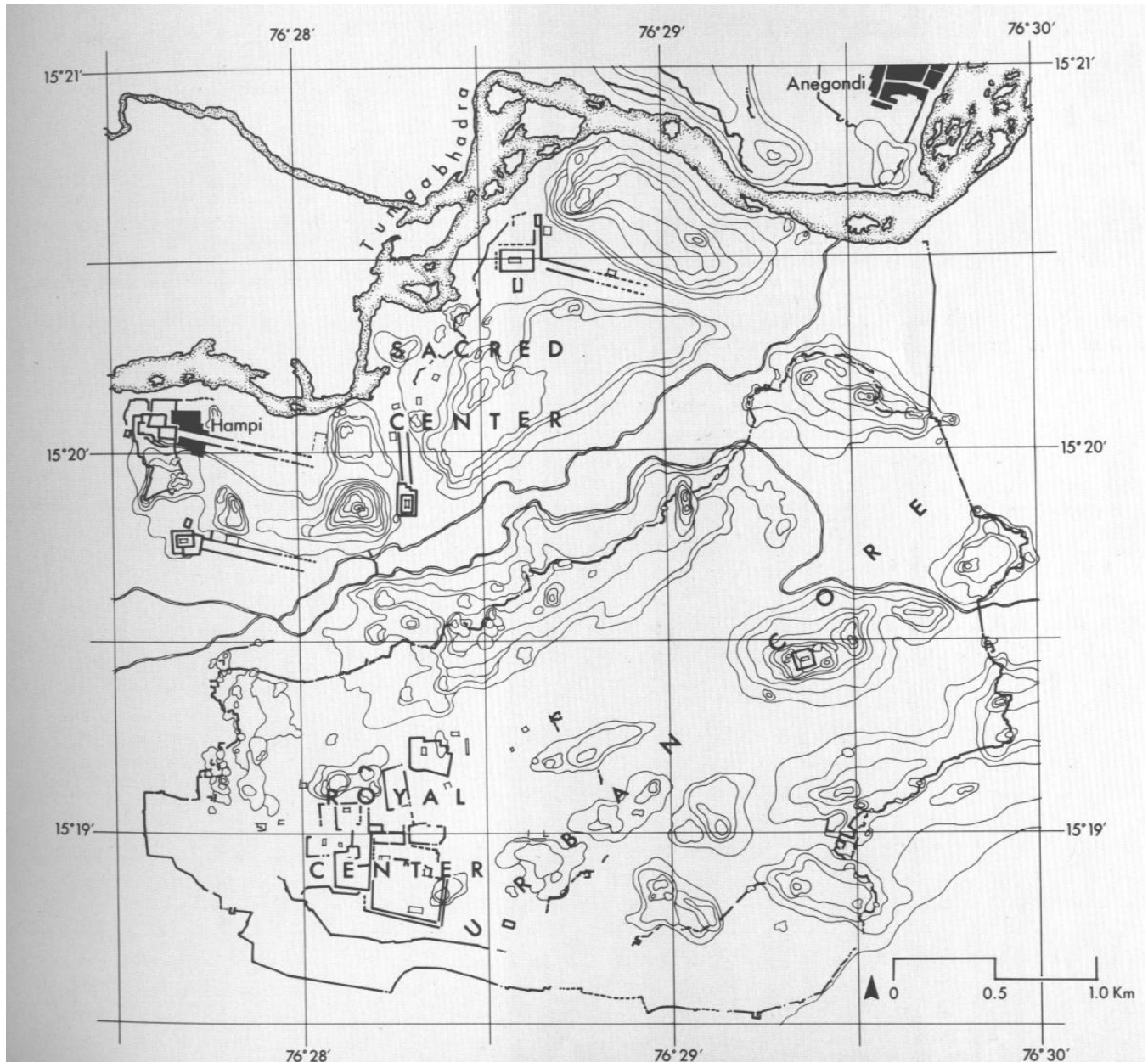
displays also generated greater loyalty from the king's core ministers and captains, which strengthened the power of the king, elevating the power of the courtiers in a virtuous cycle. The ministers were blades of "grass" to the king's "sapphire"; both sides enhancing the power of the other.

Architecture and lavish festivals also fed the central objective of reinforcing the king's position of power at the center of the administrative, architectural, and ceremonial planes in Vijayanagar. The grand scale of the architecture and the opulence of the observed festivals were not irrational, as the tone of the chroniclers might suggest. Rather, they served the important purpose of enhancing the monarch's divine and worldly power within the kingdom.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it must be remembered that in the context of the Vijayanagar politics, no player, no matter how powerful they appeared, could completely dominate the game. Contrary to the concept of oriental despotism, kings could not be "arbitrary despots" without risking alienating their ministers and captains. Such alienation could quickly lead to their downfall, as the example of Virupaksha Raya II showed. Similarly, ministers and captains who pushed too hard against the monarchs could be dismissed from service or executed. Aspirants consistently risked being killed at the slightest hint of disloyalty to the monarch. The game was anything but arbitrary, and its fluid nature makes it a fascinating subject of study.

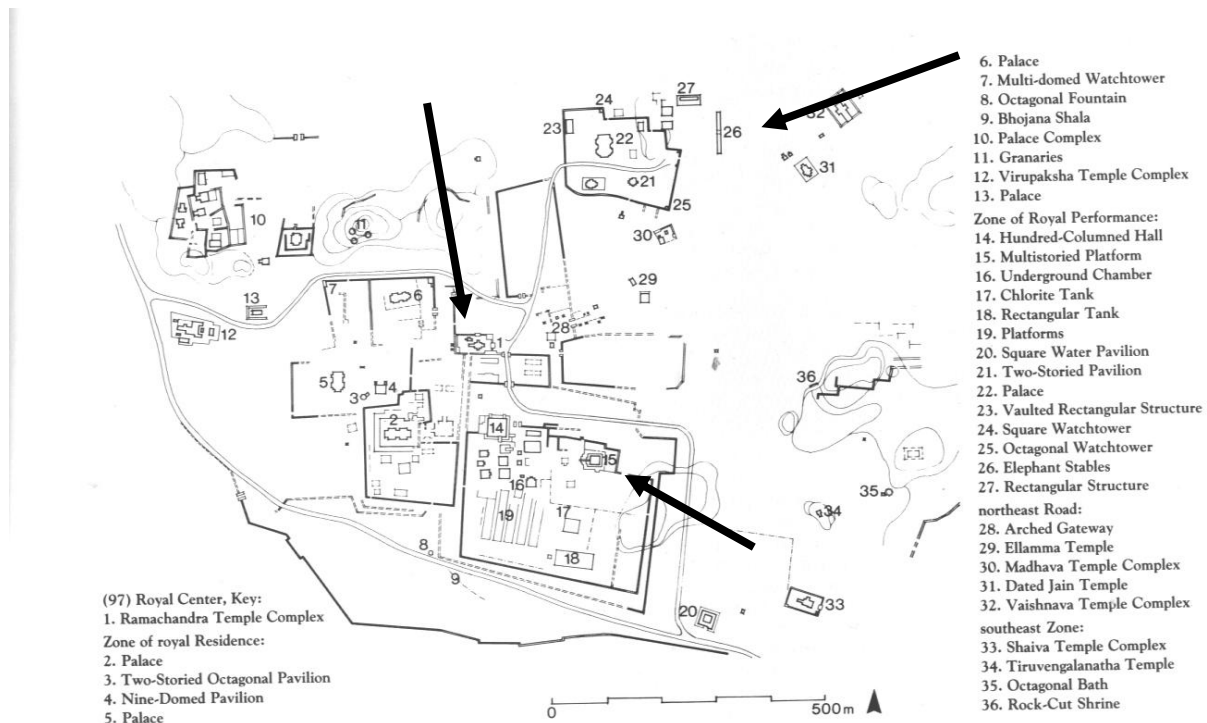
X. Exhibits

Exhibit 1 – Map of Vijayanagar showing locations of sacred and royal centers



Source: Fritz and Michell (9)

Exhibit 2 – Map of the Royal Center



Note the locations of the Ramachandra temple (#1), the Multistoried Platform (#15) and the Elephant Stables (#26).

Source: Fritz and Michell (99)

Exhibit 3 – Exterior view of the main shrine of the Ramachandra temple



Note the carved plaster figures on the outside of the temple.

Source: Fritz and Michell (16-17)

Exhibit 4 – Interior View of the Ramachandra Temple



Note the elaborately carved columns which depict religious themes.

Source: Fritz and Michell (23)

Exhibit 5 – View of Multistoried Platform



The chroniclers describe that upon this platform, workers constructed a large arched gallery in which the king and his guests observed the *mahanavami* festival.

Source: Fritz and Michell (104)

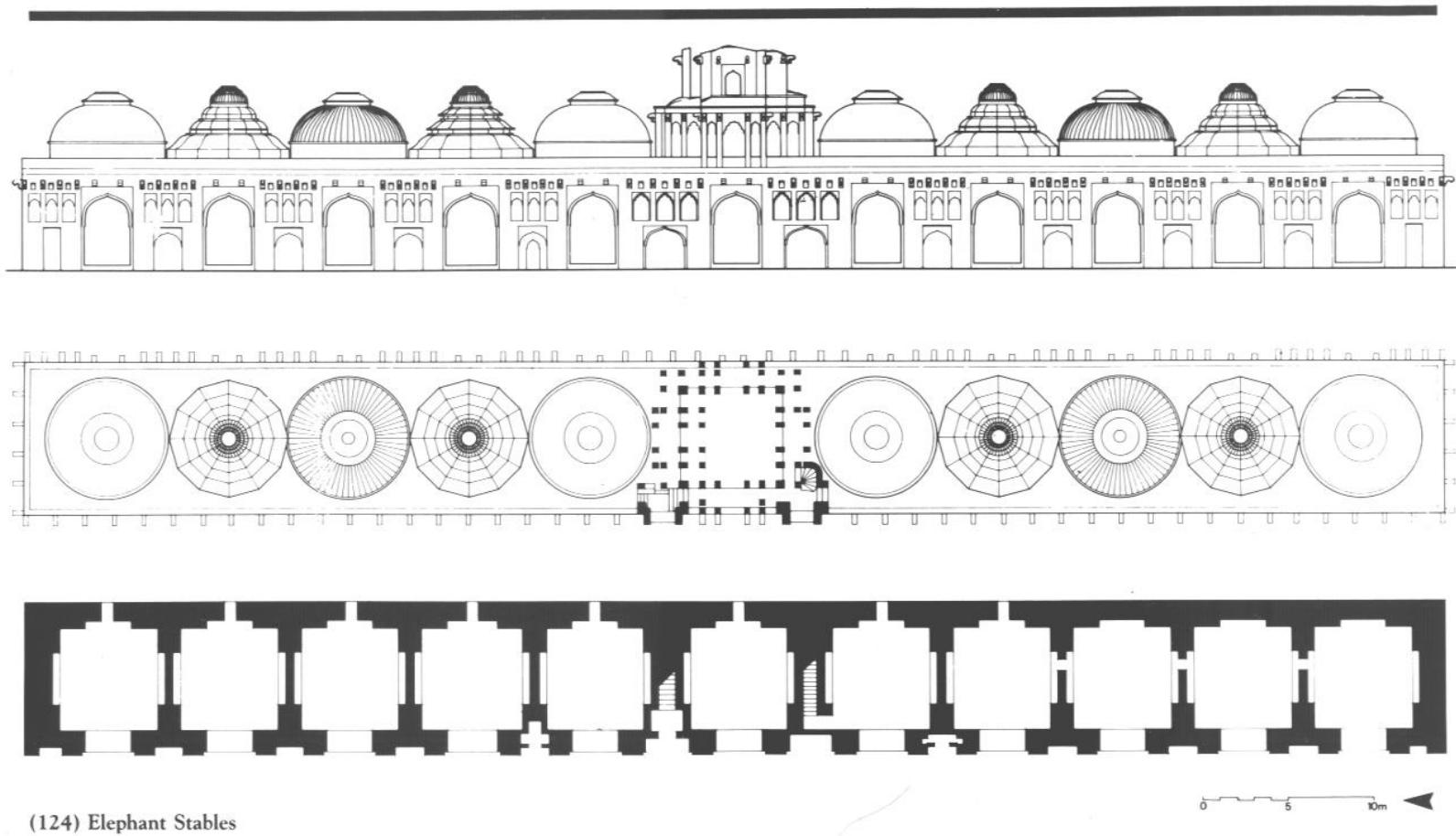
Exhibit 6 – View of carvings on the Multistoried Platform



From top to bottom: Musicians, royal horses, and hunting scenes carved on the side of the Multistoried platform

Source: Fritz and Michell (33)

Exhibit 7 – Schematics of the Elephant Stables



Note the striking symmetry in the number of stables, and in the design of the domes

Source: Fritz and Michell (107)

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