

Imperial Art

Some Speculations amid the Ruins of Hampi

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The religious architecture of Hampi does not contain art. It contains decoration, and even that is but feeble imitation. To make good this summary claim, I must forward a theory of art that excludes the fading yet well-mannered temple-complexes lining the pink waters of the Tungabhadra. Ruskin said once, ruing almost, that ‘no great art ever arose but from a nation of soldiers’. One could gamble from this stroke of vision some such sociological blather as that the organisation of speech, the representation of significant deed, the image of self necessary to arouse a people to arms, all go into preparing the ground for an eruption of aesthetic energy: energy that is marshalled to sophistication through the unifying lens of purpose – so that the issuing art will, as it were, ‘assert Eternal Providence/ And justify the ways of God to men’.

So, is great art ultimately great propaganda? Perhaps, yes. The answer will depend on who or what is the object of that clause. If propaganda is for a great empire, say, is it not also propaganda for the world that that empire comprehends? The civilisation it boasts? The time it limns? The answer, then, will depend on how great the power is that commissions the art – whether, we may venture, it has gained the favour of Providence.

But we needn’t split hairs on questions larger than apt for the space of a magazine article. The Vijaynagaras *were* a nation of soldiers. They even became a great empire under the martial Deva Raya. All we may here do is guess at why what they left to show for themselves fails really to summon the blood.

Two prior achievements are of moment to the birth of Vijaynagara architecture: that of the Turks and the Hoysalas. To begin with the first, the Sultanate of Delhi had by the middle of the fourteenth century become more invested in the land of the subcontinent than the transient devastations that had come to distinguish the early incursions from beyond the Hindu Kush. More than a hundred years into the Sultanate’s reign, the ‘inhuman eccentric’ Tuglaq, as the Persian historian Ferishta calls him, brought his insatiable curiosities to the South of the Deccan. Sharply aware of the destruction that it was custom to find in his wake, the aging Empires of the south, the Hoysalas, the Cholas, the Pandiyas, and such, stood nervously quaking beneath his downward march. When Tuglaq reached Warangal, alarm was occasioned. He swept through to the northern banks of the Tungabhadra, to a place then called Anegundi, when the intrigues of court brought him to a pause. Fatefully, he deposited two feudatories at Anegundi before turning back. These two Hindu warlords, lately become Satraps, proved enterprising enough to realise the granite upon which their hills had heaped. They proceeded to mine and construct a fortress capable – or so it was widely believed – of rebuffing the mightiest of Turkic advances, and under the guise of protection, assembled almost all the grudging legions of the South into an empire later called Vijaynagara.

But does such an assemblage of avuncular empires itself an empire make? Or is it proper, perhaps, to call it in inception a *federation* – defined loosely here as a controlled cooperation of states retaining individual identity? At any rate, it seems in the fourteenth century, before the advent of Deva Raya, the rulers of this land, and the artists they commissioned, did not find pressing the need to invent a unifying

or even identifying aesthetic. Plenary fear of Tuglaq seems to have sufficed for sections to keep as one – and the jagged promontory of Asia was not likely to awe with glorious art any neighbouring powers eyeing it from below.

The dynasty is thus content to display shapes, carvings, arrangements, and design recognisable from great arts of the past – Hoysala, and Chalukya before – purged however, of the vigour and harmony of civilisational purpose – a phenomenon reminiscent, in some ways, of the slavish Attic imitations of Republican Rome before the marble advent of the Caesars. The gopuras are nicely packed; though they copy the Hoysalas, they do not possess the wild and frenetic symmetry that fractalize before attention at the better of the Hoysala gopuras – the Lakshminarayana temple of Hosaholalu is certainly worth a look. And needless to say, neither the Hampi nor Hoysala gopuras command the view whole as the lingam-worshipping Cholas chose to build theirs, flaring – on both sides of the amalaka (or capital, if the term is fitting) – into the heavens like a deputy of the sun: a gopura proper, in short, to a real empire.

Lakshminatayana Temple of Hosaholalu



The Hampi columns are mute. They do not appeal, have the purposiveness without purpose that Kant marked as the distinguishing quality of art. On the other hand, the columns of pre-Vijaynagara temples in Karnataka are unique in the history of art. Invented by a flamboyant Chalukya master of Badami, I am inclined to guess, the Karnataka column becomes in itself a figure, as if a portly ballerina bedecked with consorting lines was set to spin, holding the mandapa up as she stands. The shaft of the column distends, boasting audaciously clashing designs in every successive segment disc-like and tapers at

capital and base. This form is perfected by the Hoysalas and we see in their poor copies at Hampi a testament to the enervation occasioned by displacement of context.

Lathe_turned_pillars_at_Chennakeshava_temple_in_Belur



But the city does not all show so poor. The secular monuments at Hampi are both winning and inventive. The unfinished dancing pavilion of the Vijaya Vittala complex, for instance, a consummately designed unit of noble proportions, introduces to column-design some features so novel in its mish-mash conception that it savours the hint of Dada. Gazing downwards from the bulbous beams and along the slender pillar we see midway what can only be described as a frieze loggia. The reader will have to imagine the fine Arab colonnades that garnish the extended galleries of the Doge's palace in Venice excerpted and carved into relief on the erect stone of the Pavilion's pillar. Its juxtaposition of features and styles will I hope excuse my passing invocation of Dada.

Dancing Pavilion of the Vijaya Vittala Complex



Besides the dancing pavilion (ca. 1515), the vague Assyrian shapes looming over the elephant stables, the processual colonnades of the agora, the elaborate venation of aqueducts relenting into the strangely tessellated pyramids of the baths, all restore some measure of artistic splendour to the city. But all these monuments of note are strictly secular in nature and purpose. And almost all – save the conspicuously Islamic-style elephant domes – are constructed or consecrated after the ascent of Krishna Deva Raya. Raya took reign of the land and consolidated through military genius a loose federation of states into an expansive empire and represents in some ways the last stand of the subcontinental forebears against the irresistible charge of Mongol dominion in Asia. An academic observer of late medieval temples may attribute the gradual depletion of vigour in religious art to the possibility that the various strands of Hinduism in the South had won a comfortable cohabitation by the 16th century – a thesis drawn out in the interlacing Vaishnavite and Shaivaite myths unfolding along the subordinate friezes of Hoysala building. A more adventurous speculator may posit an end to the Age of Faith, to borrow Will Durant's moniker, in South India analogous to that in Europe, which displays similarly a decline in ecclesiastical architecture in the centuries running-up to the counter-reformation.

Queens-bath



Whatever be the cause of the singular distribution of delights and, overwhelmingly, disappointments of Hampi, we can still observe among the rocky hills the concurrence of Imperial purpose with artistic splendour (and its negation). We might conjure an explanation wherein, perhaps to display the dancing styles of empire in flesh and form for the dignified audiences of visiting nobility, the architecture of the dancing pavilions comes through its musical pillars and suggestive shapes to sing the praise of maidenly form: and so, we might observe, propaganda for empire becomes praise of the actual.

Had the Vijaynagaras abided, it would be worth speculating, given these flashes of promise, how secular architecture would have organically developed in the South of India.