

# Interdependence of Animal and Men in 14<sup>th</sup> Century Vijayanagara Empire as Represented through Sculptural Reliefs

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## Abstract

Animals represent the most primitive and longest imagery of contact and coexistence with man in art. Most of the present day domesticated animals share a common thread of evolutionary pattern with humans in similar surroundings and have evolved in parallel with that of mankind. Since the beginning of the human civilization, animals have played a major role in the socio-economic productivity of the human society as seen through the transition of the hunter-pastoral-agricultural and urban mode of human livelihood. The animals also became a part of human rituals and imagination as evident from earliest rock art sites, such as that of Bhimabetka (Raisen District, Madhya Pradesh), where animals are seen as one of the preferred subject matter. The present paper is a study of the reflection of the changes influencing the 14<sup>th</sup> century Vijayanagara Society in terms of man-animal inter-relation as well as interdependence, through the sculptural art in the form of high reliefs on the monuments at the site.

[**Keywords:** Vijayanagara, Hampi, sculpture, relief, landscape]

## Introduction

The Vijayanagara empire came to political and socio-economical prominence during 14<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> century in southern India. The landscape of the capital city of the Vijayanagara empire is a striking amalgamation of granites ridges with very limited plain terrain and granite hill crops with the river Tungabhadra flowing through in meandering paths. It clearly 'impresses of the works of man upon an area.' (Hoelscher, 2009) The integrated landscape of this site has an approach that coalesces two perspectives: landscapes as representations and landscapes as material artifacts. The city was established at such location after clearing a vast wilderness. Villages sited on terraces above the floor of the Tungabhadra valley date from prehistoric and early historic times. Burial grounds and paintings preserved under rock shelters are also preserved from these early periods. S.R. Rao (Thapar, 1979) explored the right bank of the river Tungabhadra and discovered a Neolithic/Chalcolithic site, yielding handmade pottery, lipped bowls of burnished grey ware, stone axes in various stage of manufacture and stone pounders. The later excavations conducted at the proto-historic site at Māsalaiahana Gudda in Hampi revealed cultural strata of five layers. The lower most layer has yielded Neolithic in the Chalcolithic stage. The fourth layer indicates overlap. The first three layers from the top evidence a clear overlap of Iron-age Megalithic with the Neolithic in the Chalcolithic

stage.

### **A perspective from sculptural art**

The art and architecture of this period is based on the Dravidian style that flourished under the Vijayanagara rulers and is characterized by its fullness and vibrant array of themes. The art of this region is marked with a clear sense of freedom and fluency towards the expression of aesthetic aspirations of the sculptors and the plastic art and it no more remains a idealistic portrayal of art, instead it becomes a fine representation of social and cultural life rich with fluidity of themes, motifs and expressions reflected in the literature of the period under discussion. Throughout the civilizations art and architecture have been constructed with specific ideals in mind, often by ideologically driven governing elites. Most of the analytical works on Vijayanagara cultural history and art aspects seem to be concentrated on the elite, namely the royalty, nobles, traders and dancers etc. Kathleen Morrison (2001) discusses that an iconographic approach to these sculptural panels would strive to unearth precisely those social and moral issues that found expression not only in stone, but also in the minds and attitudes of those who viewed their sculptures in their original context. When we look at the art carefully, it is clearly observed the artist seems to be captivated with the depiction of man-animal relations throughout the site *en masse* and relished the representation of animals not only as companion of man in war or peace but also as the prey – to be hunted as game of entertainment.

India's art heritage is a notable document of the Indian society's changing face through the ages. By and large narrative, the Indian sculptural tradition is generally based on describing scenes from myths and legends to do with divine and semi-divine being. The appearance of urban centers meant the appearance of diverse social groups pursuing singular occupations as evident by the archaeological excavations at the site that implies the subsistence of different sections of populations occupied in various activities. Since people following different occupations came to the forefront, their livelihood and getting familiar with one place led to the distinction amid urban and rural centers. For their magnitude and extent, as well as from their elaborate perfection, they are more likely to have been the production of a powerful and refined people in a state of peace and prosperity, than as a people in continuous struggle to survive and thrive in all difficulties.

### **Representation of man-animal interdependence**

An important step to a major awareness of the complexity of the cultural interactions between humans and animals is to recognize that hybridization of humans and animals has occurred in the field of cultural evolution even more than in the field of biotechnologies and genetic engineering. As Roberto Marchesini (2009) points out in his recent studies, the confrontation and interaction with non human entity have shaped our way of thinking, our aesthetics and our technologies, as well as our language, which is full of metaphors and expressions based on zoological issues. While art history reports a number of animal-inspired forms and topics, contemporary artists are increasingly

focused on the very mechanisms of interaction between the human and animal sphere. (Andersen & Bochicchio, 2012) The high relief scenes carved on nearly all prominent edifices bring out a sense of equilibrium in which the human – animal relation as part of space as well as time as they are constitutive of signification processes that are intrinsically multi-layered, dynamic, and complex.

The Vijayanagara artist succeeds in describing the process of change and evolution in society, economics, and philosophy and through his artistic expression as it weaves in and around human life. A state of tranquility and relative liberty appears at all times to have been favorable to the cultivation and perfection of arts as seen during Vijayanagara times also. The subject of most ancient sculptures and wall friezes was the Divine, but this time - it is the royal themes that occupy the artist. Local costumes and musical instruments are among the common secular motifs. It clearly indicates that the secular trend of the Vijayanagara art and architecture flourished under the rulers' patronage and it managed to find a hold alongside the prevailing parallel trend in religious themes of Hindu mythology. Thus, Vijayanagara 'emerges as a very sophisticated and progressive, highly developed unique urban-rural agglomeration of the 16<sup>th</sup> century capital city.' (Thakur, N., 2007) Pre-existing political and economic structures, sacred beliefs, and social frameworks, though modified during the Vijayanagara period, were integral to ideological, social and economic practices and organization. (Sinopoli & Morrison, 1995) But these changes in productivity of the society did not alter the interdependence of men on animals which still remained an important source for food, transport and occupation.

While describing the Vijayanagara capital, Domingo Paes remarks that,

“... from here (gate) to the king's palace is all streets and rows of houses, very beautiful, and houses of captains and other rich and honorable people; . . . rows of houses with many figures and decorations pleasing to look at.” (Sewell, 2000)

The various panels carved on the walls of these edifices were like an art gallery for the members of the royal family as well as the general public showcasing every aspect of the society of contemporary times. The sculptors were able to represent the significance of changing political and religious conditions on depiction of secular themes like political and diplomatic conditions, sports, hunting, dances etc. in art through a cross cultural and historical perspective as evident from the body movements, dress, hair style and ornamentation of the male and female figures represented in very high relief on the panels. This sculptural art has its own distinctive stamp of exquisite workmanship, elaborate and intricate coiffure, drapery and superb modeling of the human as well as animal figures. It is evident that the imagination of the craftsmen found a fair play to display the fashions and tastes of his contemporary society not only in dressing and religion but also in the entertainment involving hunting scenes of 'game animals.'

Sagoff (1974) focuses on cases where animals serve as a generally recognizable cultural emblem of some idea or concept and believes that this cultural function provides a reason for valuing and preserving wild animals. According to Sagoff (1974):

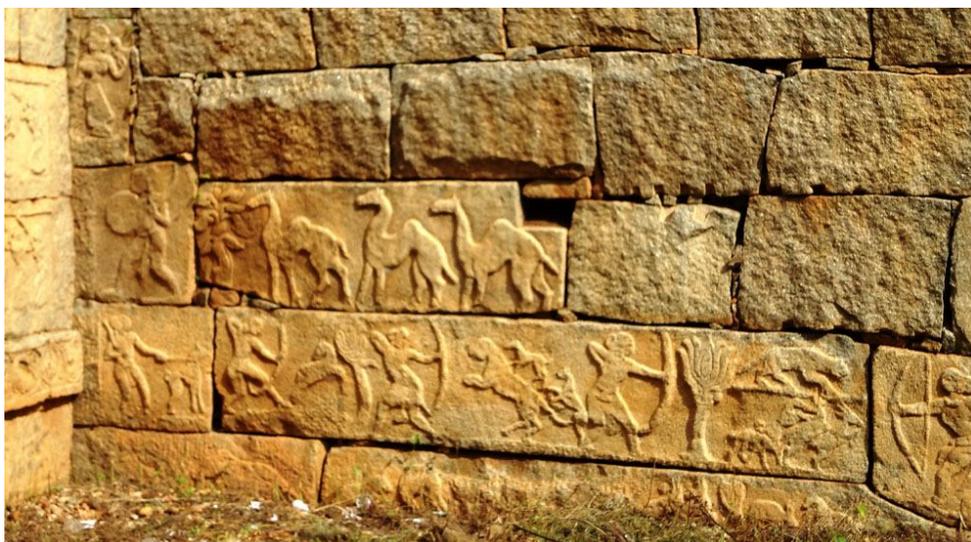
A society which values freedom and which makes its forests or the wildlife in them the expressive symbols of freedom will not treat the wildlife in them frivolously, nor discard them without a second thought. If it does, then this act will count as evidence that the society either no longer values freedom or that its paradigms of freedom have changed. ... In this case, we can draw the conclusion that the meaning of freedom in that society has itself changed. Accordingly, one way to keep our concept of freedom intact is to respect the objects that express it.

This account is widely applicable to animals, since their forms can be said to have functions in the sense that those forms have been naturally selected in virtue of performing certain tasks. William Hogarth explained that “the race-horse, having all its parts of such dimensions as best fit the purposes of speed, acquires, on that account a consistent character of one sort of beauty. The state of Vijayanagara was evidently military in nature. The presence of numerous elephants and horses in the royal establishment is mentioned in the foreign chronicles as well as by the sculptural depictions on the monuments such as the Mahānavamī platform and the panels on the enclosure wall of the Hazāra Rāma temple. Devarāya II earned the title Gajaventekara or Gajabetekara as he was well versed in the art of elephant hunting. A copper coin that has elephant pictogram, issued during the reign of the same king mentions his title as ‘gajabēntekāra. (ARASM, 1935)



Razzak also mentions a large number of elephants in the city of Vijayanagara and mentions that “one sees there more than a thousand elephants, in their size resembling mountains and in their form resembling devils.” (Sewell, 2000) There is a dated epigraph on a slab near Zanānā enclosure, which record donation to god Narasimha located near elephant stables by Konamarsayya. (Nagaraja Rao, 1985) In the reliefs found on the various monuments at Vijayanagara, man’s domination over the animals has been well depicted and captured. Although a mighty beast, an elephant meekly submitting to a man is realistically portrayed. Human figures and the animals are treated in almost same scale in most of the places the elephants are depicted only in profile while the human figure are seen in profile, full frontal or three-quarter view. The human figures themselves have a lot of movement. The gait of the elephants in their forward march is seen in the movement of their legs and the swing of their tail where one foreleg and one back leg are bent. Their heads held high, looking majestic and dignified elephants go forward in a single file. Some sculptures depict ropes running across their legs thus suggesting their tameness. Elephant calves are also depicted beside their mothers.

We find mention of the sheds made of graphite, which accommodated 400 elephants, and the royal stables had 40,000 horses in them. (Sastri & Venkataramanayya, 1946) Import of horses played a prominent part in the foreign trade. The effective demand for war-horses arose to meet the requirements of cavalry which formed an important wing of the army. The strength of the cavalry may be gauged from the observations of Fernao Nuniz, a Portuguese traveler ‘*The King (Krsnadēvarāya) every year buys thirteen thousand horses of Ormuz, of which he chooses the best for his own stables and gives the rest to his captains...*’ (Sewell, 2000) The Vijayanagara kings, who were particularly interested in importing horses from the Arabian Peninsula, encouraged overseas trade. A copper plate grant of Dēvarāya-II claims that he had ‘*ten thousand Turuska horsemen in his service.*’(Rice, 1974)



The horses are depicted vividly in sculptures on panels of the Mahānavamī dibbā, the Rāmacandra temple, and other temple walls. These reliefs show the horses in motion

– mostly as a part of some procession, and are elaborately and extensively treated. Besides being proportionate in size, the horses are decorative but dresses with restraint. They are generally fitted with a saddle, bridle, reins and stirrups. They have been placed out well. Cavalry then formed an important wing of the army and the sculptor's knowledge of the horses appears to be both personal and intimate. These reliefs reveal the rich and imaginative mind of the artists, their knowledge of the moods, habits and anatomy of the animal. The horses are depicted in various postures – standing, marching, galloping and sometimes carrying riders on their backs.



Another interesting feature highlighted by the wall reliefs seen at the Hazāra Rāma temple and the Mahānavamī platform is the representation of camels. It verifies the information provided by the foreign travelers that to strengthen his army Devarāya II modernized his armed forces by induction of a Camel Corps. At that time, these animals which were native to the deserts of Rajasthan were brought into South India. To commemorate this event copper coins were issued by the king wherein the figure of camel was shown on the obverse. The artist emphasized the exotic nature and rendered them faithfully and artistically. This concept also bring forth the terms based on widespread commercial diffusion of animal imaginary and thus associating the *exotic* and *remote* ideas of these animals while the remaining one appear to merge with their keepers – an antithesis of the dualism at the very origin of interrelationship between man and animals.

Like any other royalty across the cultures, sports and hunting expeditions were one of the favorite pastimes of the nobility of the Vijayanagara also. One can clearly observe the depiction of such scenes on the high wall reliefs at the Hazāra Rāma temple and the Mahānavamī platform. The artists and the sculptors appear to be preoccupied with the question of how best to represent the values and ideals of his times through a

permanent medium. The panels show wrestlers in a bout being watched by royal personnel, hunting scenes involving hunter either on horseback or on foot attacking ferocious tigers or a herd of deer with bows and arrows, most of the time accompanied by hunting dogs and drum beaters. The artists were keen on showing the motion of these themes and used the positional arrangement of the human and animal figures to indicate the direction of the animals running away from the hunter or the dogs attacking the deer in the backgrounds with much concentration on details.

At the capital, scenes of royal hunting are prominently displayed on the sides of a platform associated with the Mahānavamī festival. Here, panels showing military and hunting episodes occur in successive registers. Royal figures with bows, accompanied by dogs, beaters, and other hunters, are surrounded by deer; men standing with daggers, or mounted on elephants and accompanied by lancers, attack lions. (Fritz, 1986) The concept of formality in art history refers to works whose organizational principles are clear to observers or participants. (Taylor, 1981) The panels at Vijayanagara clearly show that the visibility, space and perspective did not lost its meaning on animal representation in comparison to its human counterparts. But still in some scenes, especially of hunting, the events seem to become as illusory in terms of their natural responses, and the fact remains that the space which they inhabit is after all 'artificial'; hence there is clear tendency to bundle toward the edge of the margin. (Berger, 2009) the artist followed the popular notion that the animals were meant to be 'observed' – a clear delineation from early symbiosis of man and animal.

### ***Miscellaneous Carvings:***

While the mythic landscape was shared by all who shared the Hindu beliefs, these associations were manipulated by Vijayanagara rulers to enhance their own power and to legitimate their rule in the eyes of local chiefs and other elites. Architecture and urban structure, as well as inscriptions, give evidence to this landscape of power constructed by kings, and experienced by royals and other elite. (Mack, 2004) The idea of power can be observed in the pattern of the steps leading to the various building foundations at the Royal and Zanānā Enclosures which are flanked with stone balustrades. These motifs illustrated on these balustrades illustrate a range of varieties of sculptural carvings or high reliefs, viz. (Thakur, P., 2009)

- ◆ Balustrade decorated with relief mythical *yālīs* either carved on the stone or made of stucco;
- ◆ *Yālīs* spouting entwined foliage;
- ◆ Elephants carved on the stone balustrades in various postures;
- ◆ Carved Lions in different postures;
- ◆ Horses represented either following elephants or with their trainers.

These animal – real as well as mythical, symbolize the power and stability of the edifice as well as of the empire. Thus, this instance of sculptural art at the site of Vijayanagara should be understood against the larger background of proliferation of centres of political power, a burgeoning economy, prospering, upwardly mobile social groups, institutionalization of religious cults, and interaction with foreign traditions.



### **Conclusion**

In every case, an iconographic approach to landscape shows how people create their own worlds and, along the way, construct visual representations of their individual and group beliefs, values, tensions, and fears. (Hoelscher, 2009) Not one meaning emerges from the complex array of suburban landscapes, but rather a multiplicity of understandings that entwine identity, race, gender, class, and politics. The paper agrees with what Bernard Fibicher claims about the meaning of animal presence in visual art through different historical periods: such presence would be proportional to our need of animal contacts, whereas it would be inversely proportional to our real closeness to the natural realm. (Fibicher, 2008)

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