VIJAYANAGARA

Splendour in Ruins

Editor

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INDIA IN 1858

Territory under British control

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PREFACE
VIJAYANAGARA: SPLENDOUR IN RUINS

A Photographer's Thoughts

John Gollings

Vijayanagara: Splendour in Ruins presents a series of essays that extends from the history of Vijayanagara in South India, to its archaeology and architecture, illustrated by a number of amateur and commercial photographers. It offers readers an opportunity to analyse one of India's most extensive medieval sites, and the means by which Vijayanagara was photographed through the nineteenth century. This volume looks in particular at the stylistic and visual similarities and differences the various photographers to the site established, the technologies available over time, and their influences on the compositions adopted by each practitioner. Starting with Alexander Greenlaw and his use of the calotype in 1855–56, through the work of Nicholas & Co. in the 1880s, Vijayanagara is systematically mapped in its various states.

This publication sets a framework for the subsequent visual documentation at Hampi (the capital of the dynasty), but its power is much wider. While it is a valuable contribution to the scholarship of the Vijayanagara site, the present volume is also important for demonstrating crucial issues in the history of photography. Technical and aesthetic concerns are raised and discussed through pictures and essays, but it is the subject matter that makes these potent and accessible. This recurrence facilitates a comparison of style and approach, while also enhancing the differences in agendas and equipment available to each photographer.

My own preoccupation with photographing Vijayanagara has lasted twenty-seven years. Through both practice and reflection, the results have profoundly influenced my work as an architectural and archaeological photographer. When I first began work on the Hampi ruins, I was unaware of any antecedents and decided to bring the city back to life through selective and controlled flash exposures at night. I was less interested in the ruination, and more interested in the idea that an imperial city held important lessons for modern planners and architects, providing I could infer from the original living city.

This was a narrative approach, which relied on late twentieth-century photographic techniques and theory unavailable to the pioneering photographers of the nineteenth century. The ability to "read" a photograph is a consequence of its own proliferation and interpretation by scholars. The Alkazi Collection of Photography's selection of Vijayanagara images draws its strength not only from the very nature of being specific and focused, but also from a visual chronology covering the invention of the medium in 1839 through its most rapid technical development.

Photographing buildings, especially within their surrounding context, is not as straightforward as it seems. A studio photographer, like a theatre director, chooses the time, place, camera position, lighting and expression of his sitter. The subject can also interact with the composition. An architectural photographer, on the other hand, encounters significant constraints and is often at the mercy of his subject. The geography of the building to be photographed, its access, the weather and time of year are manifest restrictions, along with specific technical limitations the practitioner needs to work with. In the nineteenth century, these technical limitations were relatively profound. In the case of Alexander Greenlaw's work, they played a significant part in what was possible. The sheer difficulty of recording an image tended to force his composition into conventional nineteenth-century aesthetics. He could not afford the luxury of multiple exposures or experimental composition. The mindset would have been more that of a painter, looking for balance and harmony rather than intellect and critical vision. A good example of this is fig. 42, with a strong foreground object leading the eye diagonally into the distant landscape. A lot of the pleasure taken by early photographers was the thrill of optical clarity and the fixing of a moment in history, rather than interpretation. It was other visual artists who felt liberated by the invention of photography and its ability to document reality. Another example of classic nineteenth-century composition is fig. 43, dividing the picture

plane into thirds and leading the eye through a foreground object. A much more pragmatic document is fig. 114, with obvious camera movement during the long exposure; to me it is redolent of the heat and exhaustion that Greenlaw must have felt as he worked his way through the site.

One of my projects at Vijayanagara was to re-photograph all of Greenlaw's images. This exercise highlighted one of the medium's greatest abilities: observing and comparing changes over a period of time. When executed methodically, one can note an implicit trust in the imagery and a fascination with the differences, especially when entire buildings have disappeared. The work also taught me a great deal about Greenlaw's instincts, equipment and limitations. His negatives are impressive (16 x 20 inches), his camera would have been heavy and awkward to handle, and the tripod needed a large and stable platform. Being a photographer myself, I could often guess the positions of Greenlaw's cameras: they were logical and evident to another practitioner. I also knew that he had a "normal" lens, one whose focal length equalled the diagonal of his negatives and gave a natural perspective of 45°; this field of view, standard on early cameras, implied a focal length of 600 mm with an attendant narrow depth of field. A small aperture with consequent long exposures was necessary to seize focus. The inclusion of figures within his compositions obliged Greenlaw to work in full sun. The human figure placed within landscape to indicate scale became a hallmark of nineteenth-century photography, and was employed by many later photographers, such as Ezra Stoller (1915–2004), who carried architectural photography to new heights one hundred years later. One could also date the pictures from the sun angles. Greenlaw worked in summer, while I worked on the site in winter and therefore could never match the shadows.

In 1856, paper negatives were only sensitive to blue and ultraviolet light. This had profound implications for the photographer, while rarely considered by historians. The unique, long tonal range of early architectural photography is due not only to the self-masking properties of the positive material, but also due to the fact that blue sky always exposes as white, and that shadows contain delicate details. The shadows are in fact overexposed, being lit with blue and ultraviolet light from the sky (remember the blue shadows

on early Kodachrome film) which smoothes out the tonal range. Clouds are never visible; warm and coloured stone comes out much darker than is apparent. These different tones affected the balance of the composition, as the photographer previsualised the final print while adjusting the camera. Figs. 92 and 122, both taken by Greenlaw, would not work on modern film: the sky would be an overpowering grey and the building tones would merge into the sky, producing an incoherent mess. Ironically, the later documentation of the site by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) in the twentieth century is woeful because of this very effect of film having improved spectral sensitivity.

It is interesting to compare the later work of Edmund David Lyon to that of Greenlaw. Whereas Greenlaw was constrained by his lens and needed to tilt up (fig. 46), Lyon used a smaller camera with glass plates and wider angle lenses with sufficient covering power, allowing him to correct rising front perspective. By comparing figs. 74 and 76, one can observe the difference. In figs. 64 and 66, the growing sophistication in Lyon's work is apparent in his strong use of wider lenses, producing a complete coverage of the temples, whereas Greenlaw was forced to crop some elements. In fig. 81, Lyon looks in elevation at the octagonal tower but very dispassionately, not afraid to show the less glamorous view. In fig. 17, Greenlaw goes out of his way to romanticise the very same building. Figs. 51 and 52 show a very confident Lyon making convincing and elegant shots of the Vitthala temple, the first to focus on the stone chariot, subordinating the much larger *mandapa* on either side, and again showing a detail of the chariot precisely placed to rise above the background. While Greenlaw was the consummate pictorialist under arduous conditions, Lyon, the other hero of this collection of photographs, developed a strong geometry within the composition, beyond that of Greenlaw. His photographs demonstrate the importance he gave to the point of view; his choice is still of great satisfaction to the modern viewer.

There are few publications of nineteenth-century architectural photography that so subtly and powerfully inform the reader. Ebrahim Alkazi has collected a remarkable set of images, published here in accessible form. That they happen to be of Vijayanagara helps justify its place as a World Heritage site.

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

VIJAYANAGARA IN HISTORY AND MEMORY
Anila Verghese

As the most extensive of all ruined sites in South India, Vijayanagara has always had an irresistible appeal to visitors and scholars. From the mid-fourteenth century to 1565, this site served as the capital of the Vijayanagara state that was founded in the wake of the Muslim invasions of peninsular India. As the seat of a military empire that incorporated all of South India except for the Kerala coast, Vijayanagara was built up by its rulers as a showpiece of imperial magnificence. It came to be celebrated throughout Asia and even Europe for its might and wealth.

"The City of Bidjanagar [Vijayanagara] is such that the pupil of the eye has never seen a place like it, and the ear of intelligence has never been informed that there existed anything to equal it in the world," wrote Abdur Razzaq, the envoy from the Persian capital of Herat to the court of the Vijayanagara king Devaraya II in 1443.[1] Besides Abdur Razzaq, other foreign travellers have left glowing accounts of the splendours of Vijayanagara. These include the Italian Nicolo Conti in the early fifteenth century as well as Portuguese visitors in the first half of the sixteenth century.

11. **Edmund David Lyon**, Hemakuta Hill Temples, Albumen Print, 1867–68.
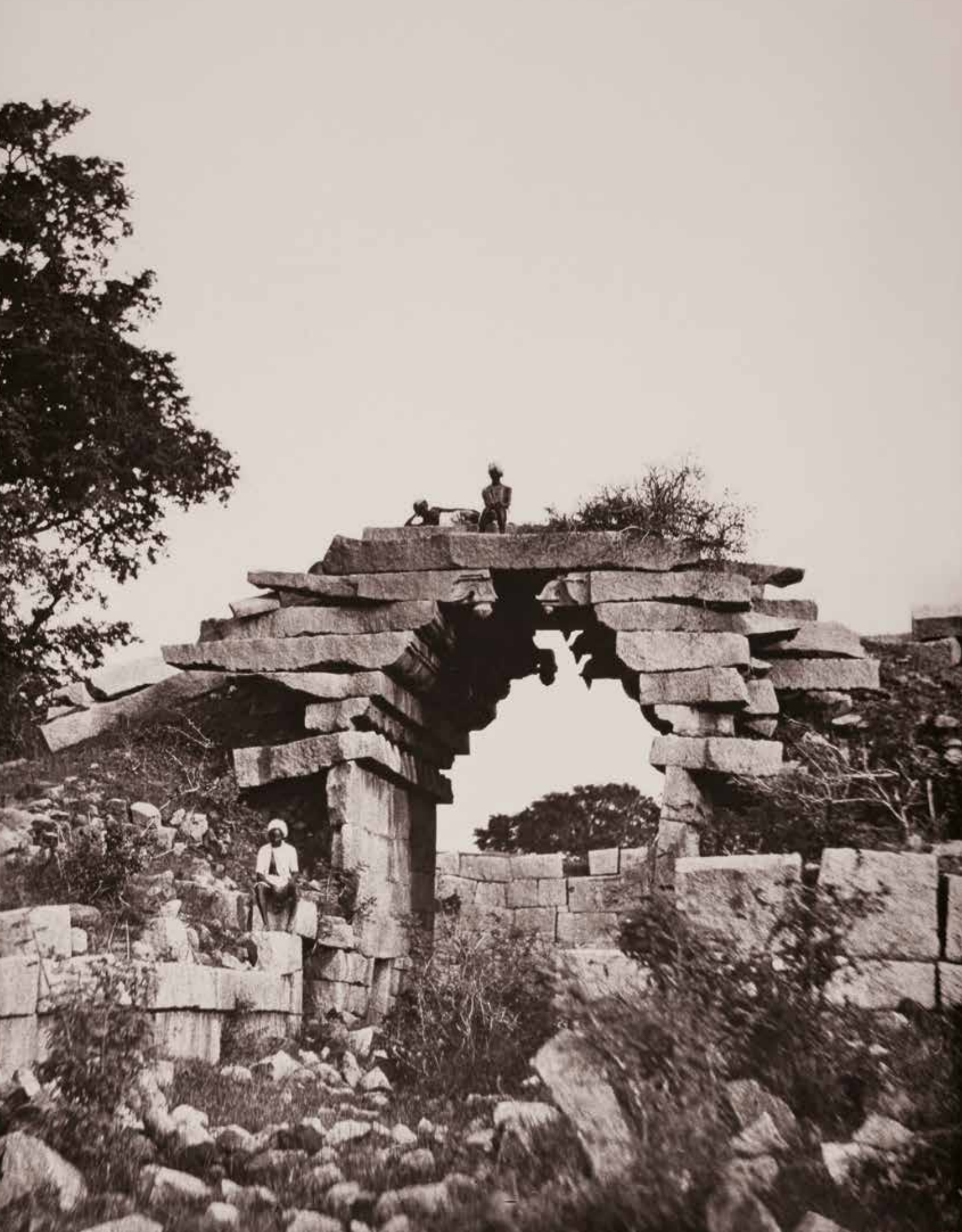
PART TWO

THE SITE AND ITS MONUMENTS
George Michell

MAPS

Chapter 3

SACRED CENTRE
George Michell

S et in the rugged gorge of the Tungabhadra, the Sacred Centre of Vijayanagara consists of four large-scale temple complexes. Each serves as the nucleus of an independent urban quarter, complete with residences and feeding-houses for priests, colonnaded market streets, wells and tanks. The temples all stand in walled compounds entered through imposing towered *gopuras*. The village of Hampi near to the south bank of the river is the only quarter of the Sacred Centre still to be populated today. (For this reason the site as a whole is generally known as Hampi.) The Virupaksha temple in Hampi village, dedicated to Shiva, is in active worship, the colonnaded bazaar street leading up to its entrance *gopura* crowded with shops and visitors, as in the past. Great festivals take place here throughout the year, attracting many thousands of visitors. In striking contrast, the other quarters of the Sacred Centre are ruined and deserted. The temples here, consecrated to Krishna, Tiruvengalanatha and Vitthala – all aspects of Vishnu – are now reduced to archaeological monuments, devoid of priests and worshippers. Even so, the landscape of the Sacred Centre still retains much of its original holiness. Pilgrims wend their way along the bank of the Tungabhadra to bathe in the river and visit those shrines associated with mythical events in the *Ramayana* epic.

19. **ALEXANDER GREENLAW,** Virupaksha Temple, East and North *Gopuras*, Modern Positive (2007) from Waxed-paper Negative, 1856.

ROYAL CENTRE
George Michell

The Royal Centre was of the greatest significance, for here lived the Vijayanagara emperors together with their family members, military commanders, ministers and other close followers. In no other part of the site is there such a concentration of meeting halls, watchtowers, stables, pavilions and baths. These comparatively solid courtly structures are all built in a unique style that blends brackets, eaves and towers typical of temple architecture with arches, domes and vaults derived from the architecture of the Deccan sultanate courts. The result is an imaginative idiom that blends Hindu and Muslim traditions – a typical expression of the cosmopolitan spirit of the Vijayanagara court. Typical examples of this hybrid architectural style are the Lotus Mahal, elephant stables, two-storey octagonal pavilion and Queens' Bath. Together with other similarly styled buildings, they stand in irregularly shaped enclosures, screened from outside view by high tapering stone walls with well protected entrances. In the middle of these enclosures, at the very core of the Royal Centre, is the Hazara Rama temple, the private chapel of the Vijayanagara emperors, its outer enclosure walls covered with royal reliefs. Nearby, the excavators have uncovered the stone basements of residences and columned audience halls. These remains are overlooked by the great Mahanavami platform that dominates this part of the site.

60. **ALEXANDER GREENLAW,** Octagonal Watchtower, with Ruined Temple in Foreground, Modern Positive (2007) from Waxed-paper Negative, 1856.

Chapter 7

GREENLAW AND HIS SUCCESSORS
Sophie Gordon

Following the introduction of photography into India in 1840, both government officials and the early photographers themselves quickly acknowledged the potential of the camera for recording the antiquities and monuments of the country. One of the earliest public pronouncements, made by Captain Harry Barr at a meeting of the Bombay Photographic Society, described India's "magnificent scenery, its temples, palaces, shrines and ruins dating back to the remotest antiquity" as the ideal subject matter for this new technology, so recently introduced from the West.[1] The introduction of the camera into India does not, however, mark the beginning of the story of official architectural documentation in the country. Before this, the Directors of the East India Company in London had, in 1847, issued a directive, taken up by the Bombay branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, to encourage the documentation of monuments in Western India,[2] with the cave temples of Elephanta considered a priority.

The camera in fact only appears after the first part of the story is complete, and then it is only one of several different methods that had emerged for documenting monuments, within the broader story of surveying, conservation and restoration. Unfortunately, this story was neither

101. **ALEXANDER GREENLAW,** Arcaded Structure in the Royal Centre, Modern Positive (2007) from Waxed-paper Negative, 1856.

Chapter 8

GREENLAW'S CALOTYPE PROCESS
Mike Ware

J ust imagine how difficult it was, in the India of 1855, to take a successful photograph. The calotype process of camera photography on paper had been invented in Britain only fifteen years previously, and for most of the intervening time, the dissemination and improvement of the calotype process had been inhibited by the patent taken out in 1841 by the inventor, Henry Talbot. The leading societies devoted to photography were not founded until 1853, and the first journals and periodicals dedicated exclusively to its practice were also launched that year. Allowing for the delays in the shipping of equipment, materials and information to India from Britain at this era, it is remarkable that a substantial number of competent photographers were already practising in the sub-continent by the mid-1850s, and had established photographic societies in all three Presidencies, of Bombay (1854), Madras (1856), and Calcutta (1856). The editor of the proceedings of the Madras Photographic Society, which were regularly reported in the *Madras Journal of Literature and Science,* was moved to reflect in 1859: "Many circumstances conspire in this country to render the pursuit of Photographic Art more difficult and less satisfactory than in the more temperate climate of Europe. The intense heat, light, and frequently too in

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115. **ALEXANDER GREENLAW,** Giant Cactus, Royal Centre, Waxed-paper Negative, 1856.

PART FOUR
DOCUMENTATION