

The Presence of Central Asians at Hampi-Vijayanagara as Revealed through Sculpture

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The Vijayanagara state was founded in the mid-fourteenth century by two local princes, Hukka (Harihara I, reign-period CE 1336-1356) and Bukka (Bukka I, who ruled from CE 1356 to 1377), sons of Saṅgama. The earlier Hindu kingdoms of south India and the Deccan had been swept away by the invasions of the Delhi sultāns in the early fourteenth century. However, the control of the latter over the territories south of the Vindhya lasted very briefly. Successful revolts resulted in the emergence of the Vijayanagara polity in the lower Deccan around CE 1336 and the Bahmani Sultanate in the upper Deccan in CE 1347. From the mid-fourteenth century till CE 1565, the capital of the Vijayanagara state was Vijayanagara city, situated on the southern banks of the river Tungabhadra. Vijayanagara city, the present-day Hampi, was built up by its rulers as a showpiece of imperial magnificence; it was a large, prosperous, cosmopolitan city which attracted people from far and near who came there in search of fortune or livelihood, for trade and commerce, for service under the rulers, or as envoys and visitors and so on. Among those who flocked to the city, especially to the royal court, were some foreigners, who can be broadly termed as 'Central Asians'.

The presence of Central Asians is found particularly in sculptures of the earliest phase after the establishment of the Vijayanagara state. The Muslims began to be employed in the Vijayanagara armies as cavalrymen and archers from the fifteenth century onwards is well known. The earliest literary reference to this is perhaps from the reign of Devarāya I (CE 1406-1422), who, according to the Kaifiyat of Pāṇem Pālaiyapat, allotted the fort of Pāṇem to one Sābat Mulk. This fort was held by Muslim officers right up to the Sāḷuva period (CE 1485-1505).¹ The

first inscriptional record is probably a copper-plate inscription of the first half of the fifteenth century which states that the Vijayanagara ruler (Devarāya II, reign-period CE 1424-1446) had “ten thousand Turushka horsemen in his service”.² However, what has hardly been noted is that even prior to this, from the fourteenth century itself there was a significant Muslim presence at the court and in the city, in the form of Central Asian entertainers, guards, horse and camel attendants and riders, cavalrymen and also as envoys and traders. These, in Vijayanagara literary and epigraphical sources, have been generally categorized as 'Turushkas' or Turks. The practice of maintaining Turkish servitors was most probably adopted by the early Vijayanagara rulers in imitation of the customs of the Delhi sultāns, who from the thirteenth century onwards had considerable numbers of Turkish slaves and service-staff. While this was particularly true of the early sultāns of the thirteenth century, the custom was also prevalent with the Tughluqs in the fourteenth century. For example, Muhammad bin Tughluq is believed to have had a large number of slaves; among these, although there were some of Indian origin and also some African slaves, Turks may have attained prominence once more.³ Among all the sultāns, Firuz Shāh Tughluq had the largest number of such slaves. The foundation of the Vijayanagara polity was in the Tughluq period, as a result of a successful revolt against the Tughluq sultān. Probably, a number of the Turkish slaves and officers, who had come to the Deccan along with the Tughluq forces, found their way further south to Vijayanagara. There is also the tradition that the founders of the Vijayanagara state, namely Hukka and his brother Bukka (who became the second monarch), spent some time in Delhi at the Tughluq court, first as captives and then as officers of Muhammad bin Tughluq. If they had been in Delhi it is not unlikely that the two brothers may have been so impressed by this practice of the sultān maintaining a large corps of Turks or Central Asians, that they and their immediate successors adopted this practice.

The presence of these Central Asians in courtly scenes is noticed particularly in the sculptures of four monuments at Hampi-Vijayanagara all of an early period. The structure with the largest number of such reliefs is the Great Platform or the

Mahānavamī Platform (Fig.1) in the core of the 'royal centre' of the city and within what is generally referred to as the 'Royal Enclosure'. That this was a royal monument used for activities connected with the king is evident, but the exact



Fig.1 : The Great Platform at Hampi-Vijayanagara

purpose that the monument served is not known with any certainty. While some believe that this structure was connected with the royal rituals of the nine-day Mahānavamī or Daśaharā festival, others term it as a 'Throne Platform'. What is of special note is that while on this monument there are numerous reliefs and friezes, none of these are of a deity. All are apparently of secular scenes. Though there are no inscriptional or literary records that help in the dating of the Great Platform, from the architectural and sculptural evidence it is believed to have been built in four phases. The earliest phase, which is the bottom-most level of the platform, dates back to the early period after the foundation of the Vijayanagara Empire, i.e. to the fourteenth century. The second phase, which is the level above this massive lower base, is also of an early phase, probably the late fourteenth century.⁴

Perhaps, one of the most famous sculptures on the Great Platform is that of the group of Central Asian dancers and other figures which is found on the south wall of the earliest phase of this structure (Fig.2). Here we see three male dancers, of whom unfortunately the one at the furthest left is partly damaged. The principal dancers are dressed in a similar style: they wear an upper garment with a



Fig.2 : Central Asian dancers and others, Great Platform

loose flowing collar with points; they wear *pyjāmās* or a pantaloon-like lower garment; at the waist they wear belts from which there are hanging ornaments. Both the intact figures wear caps with a peak at the centre and ribbed lines on it. Both have luxuriant, curly moustaches and pointed beards. They wear shoes with a sole and curved toe. The dancer to the right wears earrings. They have broad faces with somewhat slanting eyes, broad noses and lips. The dancers are performing a vigorous dance with jumping movements; two hold scarves while one is playing on a frame-drum which is like a tambourine. The dancers are accompanied by others: a standing male with one hand resting on a staff, wearing a tight-fitting upper and lower garment; he has a broad face; on his head is a turban or cap from which a hanging part flows down his back. The flowing cloth from his headgear could represent that he is an 'Arab', but if it is 'matting' he could be a Central Asian. Or, perhaps, it is neither cloth nor matting, but a pigtail. This person could be an attendant or a guard. Behind him is a man seated on a camel playing on a drum or drums; he too wears a hat and a flowing upper garment. Behind the camel rider is another male who also wears a long garment tied at the waist. This group of men appear to comprise of Central Asians, though it is difficult to determine whether they are Turks, Mongols or Iranians.⁵ The type of hats worn by the dancers is similar to those found in paintings of Central Asians of the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries.⁶ In this group while the most prominent are the Central Asian dancers, a guard or attendant and camel rider are also present. There are other groups of sculptures on the Great Platform where some of these and other types of foreigners appear.

Another interesting group of foreigners is found on the wall of the eastern entrance of the Great Platform from where steps go up to the top of the structure (Fig.3). At the lower level are three Central Asian dancers, fairly similar to the ones in Fig.2, except that while two of them hold frame-drums, the scarf is not evident. The hat worn by the dancer on the right is taller and more pointed than those of the others, both of this group and that of the group described earlier. The dancers are flanked on each side by a guard who holds a staff. Above the dancers are four guards

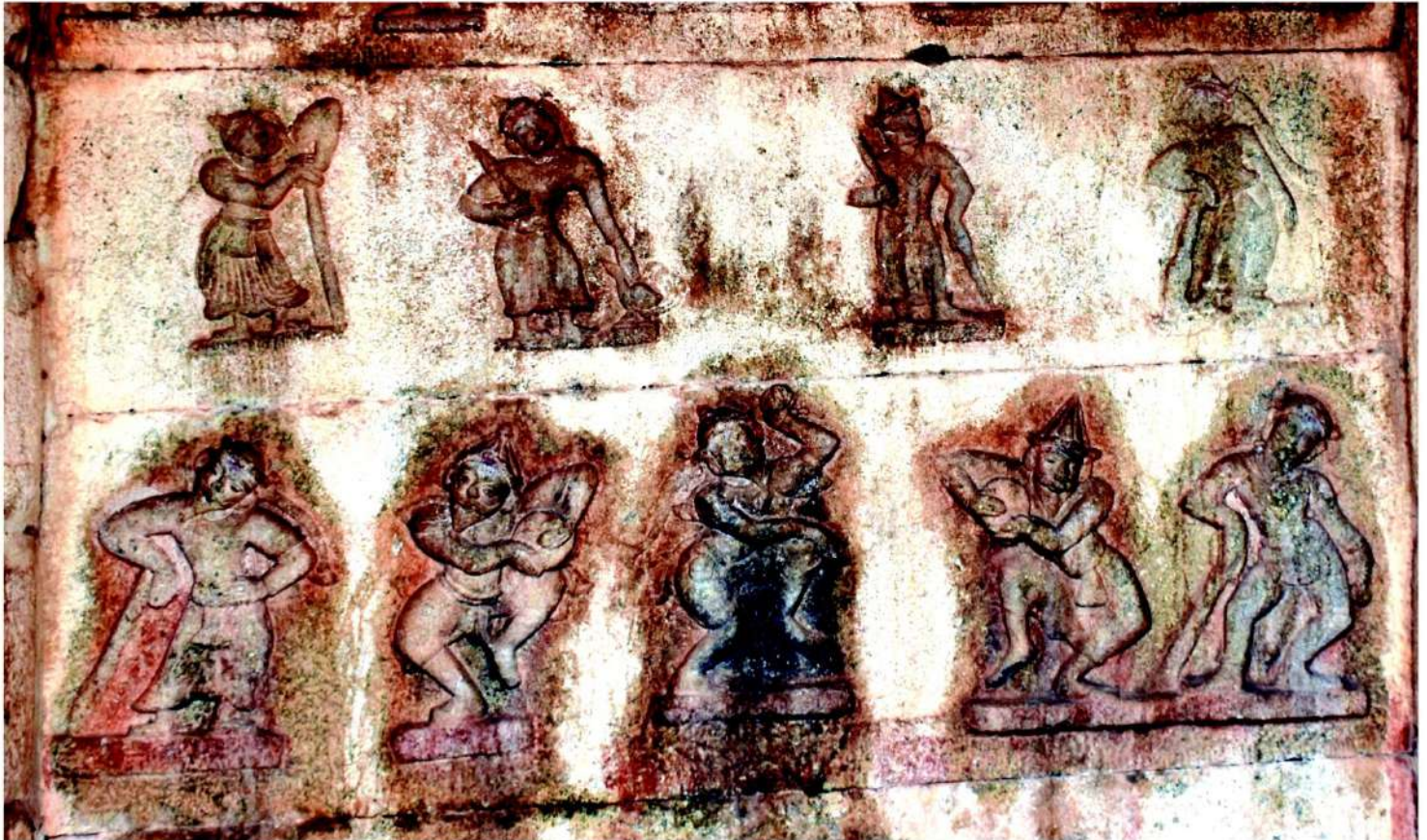


Fig.3 : Central Asians, east side entrance, Great Platform

holding staffs. A careful look at the guards reveals that many of them wear robes; all wear caps of which some are of the conical variety. From the cap, in some cases, a streamer or a piece of cloth or a pig-tail hangs down on the back of the figure. Most of figures in this group sport pointed beards and curly moustaches.

A very good example of a guard is the one found carved on a stone slab set into the balustrade of the steps on the south side of the Great Platform (Fig.4); both his hands rest on a staff or club. His long robe with a belt at the waist, pointed beard and moustache and the cap that covers his head all indicate that he is a



Fig.4 : Central Asian guard, south side steps
Great Platform

foreigner. The facial features, especially the broad face and flattish nose, indicate that he is of Central Asian origin.

The next example is a panel on the side wall of the eastern entrance (Fig.5). In it two men are clearly visible. One is a guard and the other a horse attendant who holds two horses. The latter wears a full-length, full-sleeved robe tied at the waist. He wears a shallow pointed cap with ribbed lines on it. Both the guard and the horse-attendant have pointed beards and moustaches. Their broad faces and noses as well as slightly slanting eyes reveal that they are Central Asians.

In Fig.6 we find sculptural representations of both local persons as well as foreigners. Of the three friezes of relief carvings in this image, all the figures in the

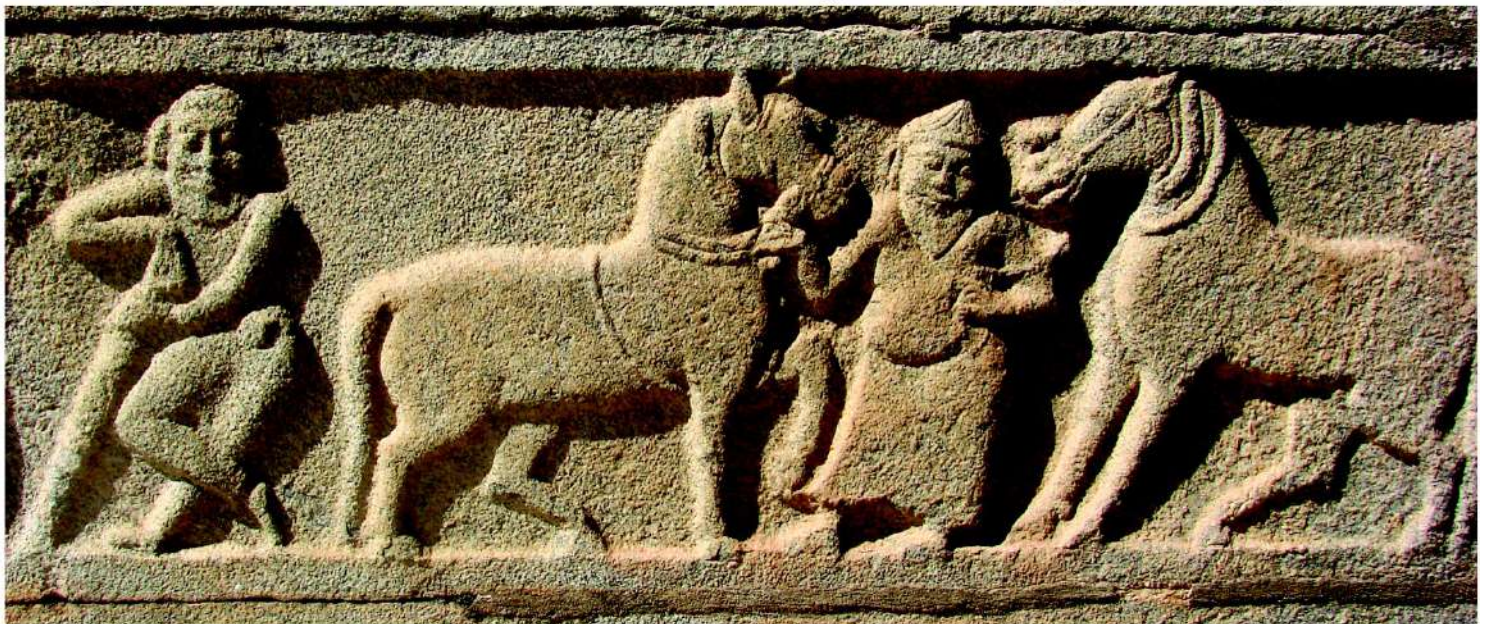


Fig.5 : Central Asian horse-attendant and guard, east side entrance, Great Platform

middle one are Indians. In it, at the extreme right is a standing woman who is looking at the two males who are hunting wild animals, mostly deer, with their



Fig.6 : Central Asians as well as hunting scenes, Great Platform

bows and arrows. In the centre is another male who is also engaged in hunting. All these males have bare upper bodies; from waist to above the knees they wear a short lower garment draped tight in *dhoti*-fashion, with some cloth hanging down between the legs in the front. All these men appear to wear earrings and they have long hair that is tied at the back of the head in a large round knot. This is the typical manner in which males are depicted in sculpture in the early-Vijayanagara period. In the middle of the fifteenth century, and more particularly in the sixteenth century, there is a change in the attire of elite males as revealed in Vijayanagara sculpture. The main difference is that the head is now covered with a tall cap (or sometimes with a turban), the hair is no longer visible and often a tight

fitting jacket covers the upper part of the body. The lower garment during this later phase is worn slightly longer than in the early phase and is draped sometimes in *dhotī*-fashion and at other times in *luṅgī*-style.⁷ In the top frieze of this image, except for the male figure on the extreme left who is probably a local as evident from his costume and hairdo, the rest are foreigners. The most important figure is evidently the male seated cross-legged on a raised platform. He wears a cap with a peak in the middle and curved ends, from below it a hanging piece of cloth or pigtails are evident. He looks towards the two men standing in a respectful posture in front of him; they wear long robes; their heads are covered with a cap. Besides the costumes, the facial features of these men reveal their Central Asian identity as it does in the case of the man behind them who is leading a horse. It is not clear what this group is meant to represent. Perhaps the group represents a foreign horse-trader and his staff, or the seated male could be a military/cavalry officer and the others his subordinates. That there were Muslims in the Vijayanagara forces is known from the above-mentioned examples of the fifteenth century of a fort being given by Devarāya I to Sābat Mulk and the inscription which mentions the 'Turushkas' employed as cavalrymen by Devarāya II. However, it is possible that even in the fourteenth century there were (foreign) Muslims in the Vijayanagara army. In the lowest frieze is a seated Vijayanagara elite male with an attendant behind him who is waving a fly-whisk over his head; possibly this represents the ruler himself. In front of him are two standing foreigners who are bowing to him. They are dressed in long robes; the head of each is covered by a pointed cap from below which is a cloth piece or pigtail that hangs down the back of the person. Behind them is a contingent of armed men (all Indians). It is difficult to identify who the two foreign men are meant to be. Perhaps, they could be envoys who are presenting themselves to the Vijayanagara ruler or they could be military commanders at the head of their troops.

In Fig.7 we see two friezes of males who appear to be Central Asians engaged in activities already listed above. In these friezes we see cavalrymen, a drummer on a camel, and dancers as seen in some of the earlier plates. In addition, there is also a foreign camel rider holding a weapon that looks like a spear or a



Fig.7 : Central Asian cavalymen, camel riders and dancers, Great Platform

sword or staff. Possibly, besides maintaining an extensive cavalry in which they employed 'Turushkas', the rulers may have also maintained a small camel corps in their armies.

In the following image (Fig.8), in the left side we see three men, obviously Indians, of whom the man in front is of higher status for he rests one arm against a bolster. In front of them are two standing foreigners, wearing long robes and caps; both have luxuriant moustaches and pointed beards. Obviously these foreigners are paying their respects to the seated figure(s). They are probably envoys from some other court or country. While we have no records of any such envoys being received by Vijayanagara rulers in the fourteenth century, it is well-known that in the early fifteenth century, Abdur Razzāk, an ambassador from the ruler of Heart, had visited the court of Devarāya II.⁸ His detailed record of his visit is an important source of information about the Vijayanagara king, court and capital at that time. The last image (Fig.9) from the Great Platform that has been selected to illustrate this paper reveals a seated foreigner, who wears a pointed cap. He is holding up a piece of jewellery, probably a necklace which either he is giving to or taking from the man in front of him. Two standing males complete this group. The three standing men are dressed similarly in long, full-sleeved robes and caps (of which two are of the pointed variety). All three (but not the seated male) also have



Fig.8 : Central Asian envoys, Great Platform

a flowing cloth piece or pigtail emerging from below their caps. Perhaps this group represents foreign traders who either brought exotic items to Vijayanagara or who came in search of luxury items to purchase. While little or nothing is known about trade in Vijayanagara city in the fourteenth century, we know that the capital was a great centre of trade, including trade in precious stones especially diamonds, in the later period of Vijayanagara history.⁹

The first two phases of the Great Platform, both of which are believed to be



Fig.9 : Central Asian traders, Great Platform

of the fourteenth century, have the maximum collection of sculptures of foreigners who can be generally termed as 'Central Asians'. There are a considerable number of panels here that depict these foreigners as entertainers, guards, horse-attendants, cavalrymen, camel attendants and camel riders, and also possibly as envoys to the Vijayanagara court and as traders. Besides this royal monument, there are three other monuments that have sculptures of such foreigners on them: the Rāmacandra temple, the gateway known as the Śṛṅgārada Hebāgilu that is at the north-east end of the 'royal centre', both of which are not far from the Great Platform (these two, like the Great Platform, are in the 'royal centre' of the city and are monuments connected with the king and court), and a gateway on Hemakuṭa hill which is in the 'sacred centre' of the royal capital, closer to the Tungabhadra.

The Rāmacandra temple, popularly known as the Hazāra Rāma temple, is royal endowment dating from the early fifteenth century.¹⁰ This temple stands within a walled enclosure. The enclosure wall of the Rāmacandra temple is the only one in the city that has relief carvings on it. On the interior of the wall, on part of the north and east side walls, the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* is carved, while on the outer face of the enclosure wall are friezes in five layers; most of these panels depict scenes of royal pageantry, except the top-most level which also has some mythological scenes carved on it. Here and there we find seated Vijayanagara royalty or elite males, accompanied by attendants, reviewing parades of militia or animals such as horses and elephants. Occasionally, in front of them, are standing foreigners, paying homage. One such example is found at the eastern end of the north side wall (Fig.10). Here two men are standing respectfully before the elite figure who appears to be seated within a pavilion. Their long, full-sleeved robes and caps reveal their foreign identity. Behind them is another male who is leading a horse. Perhaps the two men are foreign horse-traders or cavalry officers (as indicated by the horse behind them). Very similar to this group is the one from the east wall (Fig.11). Here too the royal Vijayanagara male figure is seated within a pavilion. His high status is indicated by the attendant behind him waving a fly-



Fig.10 : Central Asians before Vijayanagara royalty, north wall, Rāmacandra temple

whisk. In front is one foreigner in a respectful pose, who is very similar in costume (long robe, conical cap with a cloth suspended from it) and facial features (broad face, with flat nose and pointed beard) to the foreigners depicted on the Great Platform. Behind this personage, too, is a man leading a horse. (It is interesting to note that in this as well, as in all the other sculptures where these foreigners are shown rendering homage or paying their respects to someone, the person is shown standing, with head slightly bent forward and arms held down, with the



Fig.11 : Central Asians before Vijayanagara royalty, east wall, Rāmacandra temple

hands either meeting or crossed one over the other, quite unlike the Indian gesture of rendering respect, namely the hands held in *añjali-mudrā*). In the past, I had identified these foreigners on the enclosure wall of the Rāmacandra temple as Arab horse traders and grooms.¹¹ This supposition was based on the fact that much of the Indian Ocean trade till 1510 (when the Portuguese became the dominant sea power in this area of ocean trade) was controlled by the Arabs and also the fact that horses were an important item of import into Vijayanagara. However, on further reflection, I have come to the conclusion that most of these foreigners depicted in Vijayanagara City were probably Central Asians; for although some Arabs may have travelled inland, they were mainly engaged in ocean-trade and their activities were primarily focused in the coastal areas, while in the period following the disintegration of the Tughlaq empire a number of the Central Asians in the employment of this sultanate may have found their way down further south.

The Śṛṅgārada Hebbāgilu is a structure dated to the the fourteenth century, for an inscription states that it is “east of the city of Vīra Bukkarāya”.¹² In other words, this gateway in the circuit of walls around the royal centre was either built during the reign of Bukka I (1356-1377) or before it. This is a massive gateway. Along the central passageway of this gateway there were two reliefs of Central Asian guards, one holding a club and the other wearing a long tunic and pointed cap, brandishing a spear. This latter relief is now in the Archaeological Site Museum.¹³

The fourth monument with a sculpted depiction of 'Central Asians' is the gateway, which provides access to the top of the hill from the south-eastern end, in the wall around the Hemakuṭa hill. This is not a dated structure, but on stylistic ground could, perhaps, be assigned to the fifteenth century. On the east face of this gateway is a small relief of two Central Asian dancers (Fig.12) who are fairly similar to the dancers on the south face of the Great Platform. Of the Hemakūṭa hill pair, one holds a scarf and the other a frame-drum. Their garments, footwear, caps (with no cloth hanging), and broad faces, each adorned with beard and moustache, reveal their identity as Central Asians.



Fig.12 : Central Asian dancers, gateway on Hemakūṭa hill

It is worth noting that all these monuments in Hampi-Vijayanagara on which there are such depictions are of the early Vijayanagara period, namely of the fourteenth century (two of them, namely, the two phases of the Great Platform on which such sculptures are found and the Śṛṅgārada Hebbāgilu) and of the fifteenth, especially of the early fifteenth century. It is noteworthy that such reliefs do not appear in the later monuments in the city, except for one type which survives in a rather stylized manner. This, perhaps, denotes that the presence of these Central Asians was more prevalent in the early phase of the city's history. Or possibly by the later phase these 'Turushkas' were no longer 'exotic' so as to be specially noted in sculpture; they had settled down in the city, possibly intermarried with local women, and got fairly integrated into the local culture.

Who exactly were these Central Asians? From which countries of Central Asia did they come? This would be rather difficult to identify because these foreigners are depicted in a rather standard fashion and also, given the coarse nature of the stone on which they are carved, details of facial features and dress could not be depicted as would have been possible in painting. They could be Turks, Mongols or Iranians, probably a little bit of all of them.¹⁴

What impact do these sculptures have on the later repertoire of themes found in Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara sculptures (in the capital city itself and elsewhere south India)? An extensive survey of sculptures in the capital city and in Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara period monuments in southern India reveals that only the 'Central Asian dancer' continues to appear in later period sculptures both within the city and elsewhere, but now in a rather indigenised manner: the scarf that some of these dancers of the early period hold has been replaced by fly-whisks, but the frame-drum continues to be used. The later figures are less bulky as compared with the fourteenth-fifteenth century depictions. Their costumes also become rather stylised. The upper garment with the loose flowing collar worn by the Central Asian dancers depicted in Fig.2 has given way to a type of wide collar with points, and a belt with hangings that resemble the collar is worn over the lower garment. The caps too assume new forms. However, as in the early depictions, these later figures of male dancers, too, have beards and moustaches. They often wear circular earrings. These 'Central Asian dancers' of the later period are also generally shown to be wearing footwear (unlike their Indian counterparts who were bare-footed), at times with a curling end at the toes. One such image that has been selected is from within the capital city (Fig.13) and the other from outside the capital; the latter is from an unfinished pillared hall at Lepakshi (Fig.14).

Depictions of Central Asians form just one small group among the vast repertoire of themes found in Vijayanagara sculptures in which, besides images of deities (often in new iconographic forms), there are also abundant sculptures of human beings engaged in a variety of activities as well as of animals, birds and vegetal motifs. The sculptures of Central Asians add to the richness and diversity



Fig.13 : Pillar-relief of a Central Asian dancer of the later phase from Hampi-Vijayanagara



Fig.14 : Pillar-relief of a Central Asian dancer of the later phase from Lepakshi

of Vijayanagara sculpture, besides revealing the presence of these foreigners in the City of Vijayanagara, especially in the early phase of its history.

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