

# MATERIALITY, LABOUR AND RITUAL SPACE: ARTISANAL NARRATIVES OF THE LEPAKSHI TEMPLE

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## Abstract

This paper interrogates the artisanal historiography of the Lepakshi temple through an interdisciplinary lens integrating material culture, visual semiotics and sacred spatiality. Situating this monument within the milieu of late Vijayanagara Cosmopolitanism. This study foregrounds the obscured agency of hereditary artigiani, painters, silpins and ritual labour networks, whose aesthetic interventions transformed granite into a sacralized capolavoro. Through epigraphic interpretation, iconographic exegesis, and phenomenological readings of architectural materiality. This article repositions Lepakshi as a palimpsestic archive of embodied craftsmanship. Ultimately, this paper argues that artisanal labour constituted not merely technical production, but a performative élan vital within South Indian sacred monumentalism.

**Keywords:** Artisanality, Materiality, Semiotics, Sacredness, Historiography, Spatiality and Cosmopolitanism.

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## Introduction

The Historiography of South Indian temple architecture has conventionally privileged dynastic patronage, theological symbolism and monumental aesthetics, while, the artisanal intelligentsia responsible for the material realization of sacred architecture remains comparatively obscured within the sacred topography of Vijayanagara imperium. The emerges not merely as an architectural capolavoro but as palimpsestic archive of embodied craftsmanship, ritual labour and visual semiotics. This present study seeks to interrogate the artisanal historiography of Lepakshi through an interdisciplinary milieu integrating material culture studies, sacred spatiality, and phenomenological aesthetics.

Constructed during the sixteenth century under the patronage of imperial functionaries Virupanna and Viranna, the temple epitomizes the apogee of Vijayanagara artistic cosmopolitanism. Its sculptural exuberance, mural cycles, monolithic interventions and unfinished architectural components reveal a sophisticated ecosystem of hereditary artigiani, sthapatihis, painters, muralistes, and ritual technicians whose labour transcended utilitarian craftsmanship to embody a metaphysical raison d'être. The chiselled granite surfaces, iconographic orchestrations and chromatic fresco traditions collectively function as repositories of

civilizational memory and devotional performativity.

This paper therefore repositions the artisan not as a peripheral executor of royal vision, but as an epistemic agent in the production of sacred monumentalism. Through epigraphic interpretation, iconological exegesis, and spatial hermeneutics, this study foregrounds the interrelationship between labour, materiality and sacredness in the making of Lepakshi. Ultimately, this article argues that the temple constitutes a dynamic chef-d'oeuvre of artisanal consciousness wherein aesthetics, devotion, and technological virtuosity converge into an enduring monument of South Indian cultural modernity.

## Aims and Objectives

1. To reconstruct the artisanal historiography of the through the agency of hereditary artigiani and craft guilds.
2. To examine the materiality of granite, murals, and sculptural semiotics within the Vijayanagara sacred monumentalism.
3. To analyze the interrelationship between ritual labour, sacred economy and temple-centred artisanal networks.
4. To investigate Lepakshi murals and iconography as visual archives of cultural memory and devotional performativity.

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5. To employ interdisciplinary frameworks including phenomenology, visual culture studies and subaltern historiography.
6. To reinterpret Lepakshi as a palimpsestic chef-d'oeuvre of embodied craftsmanship and imperial cosmopolitanism.

### Review of Literature

The scholarly discourse surrounding the Vijayanagara monumentalism has evolved through interdisciplinary engagements encompassing architectural history, visual semiotics, material culture, sacred spatiality and subaltern historiography. Nevertheless, the extensive corpus of studies on South Indian temple architecture, the artisanal intelligentsia responsible for the material realization of sacred space has remained comparatively marginalized within mainstream historiographical paradigms. The present review of literature therefore seeks to synthesize the seminal contributions of architectural historians, cultural theorists, anthropologists and historiographers whose works collectively provide the conceptual scaffolding for an artisanal historiography of Lepakshi.

The architectural scholarship remains foundational to the study of Vijayanagara sacred architecture. George Michell's extensive analyses of temple morphology, Mandapa topologies, and sculptural articulation illuminate the cosmopolitan aesthetic vocabulary of the Vijayanagara imperium. His investigations foreground the architectural sophistication of Lepakshi, while simultaneously situating it within the broader continuum of Dravidian monumental traditions. Michell's emphasis on stylistic synthesis and spatial orchestration provides critical insights into ceremonial functionality and visual dramaturgy of the temple complex. Complementing Michell's architectural perspective examines Vijayanagara sacred tradition through the prism of ritual geography and religious patronage. His scholarship elucidates the interrelationship between imperial ideology, sacred topographies and devotional institutions. Anila Verghese's work is particularly significant for understanding the ritual ecology of Lepakshi and the socio-religious networks that sustained temple-centric artistic production. Her contributions enable the present study to conceptualize the temple as a performative milieu where sacrality, polity and visuality converged.

The historiographical interventions of have substantially transformed the understanding of Vijayanagara cultural cosmopolitanism. Phillip B. Wagoner's analyses of transcultural interactions between Indo-Islamic and Vijayanagara artistic vocabularies destabilize earlier nationalist narratives of cultural purity. His

theoretical emphasis on hybridity, and political semiotics provides a fertile framework for interpreting Lepakshi as a liminal zone of artistic negotiation and imperial identity formation. Similarly contributes significantly to South Indian Art Historiography through his studies on iconography, temple ritualism and epigraphy. While Nagaswamy foregrounds the ritual dimensions of sculptural production and underscores the importance of inscriptions in reconstructing temple economies and artistic patronage systems. This epigraphic methodology informs the present inquiry into sacred economy and labour structures embedded within Lepakshi's architectural fabric.

The works of further expand the discourse by examining the mobility, transformation and performative continuity of South Indian temples across temporal frameworks. Crispin Branfoot's investigations into ritual landscapes and temple expansions foreground the dynamic adaptability of sacred architecture. His approach is particularly relevant for interpreting Lepakshi not as a static monument but as an evolving archive of artisanal intervention and devotional temporality.

The theoretical contributions of provide a crucial conceptual framework for understanding sacred spatiality. In the 'Production of Space' Henri Lefebvre argues that space is socially produced through ideological, material and experiential processes. This perspective enables Lepakshi to be interpret as a ritualized spatial construct shaped through the embodied practices of artisans, patrons, and devotees. Sacred architecture thereby emerges as a lived phenomenological environment rather than a passive architectural entity. Likewise the sociological insights of Howard Becker referred to in his study offer valuable theoretical foundations for examining collective artistic production. Becker's 'Art Worlds' conceptualizes artistic creation as a collaborative enterprise sustained through interconnected networks of labour, institutions and material practices. This framework is particularly significant for reconstructing the guild structures, hereditary craft traditions and cooperative artistic ecosystems operative within Vijayanagara temple construction.

The material culture theories of further enrich this inquiry by foregrounding the agency of objects and material forms in shaping human consciousness. Daniel Miller's assertion that materiality actively mediates cultural identity and social memory provides an important lens for analyzing the granite surfaces, pigments and sculptural textures of Lepakshi as repositories of embodied cognition and ritual intentionality.

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Subaltern Historiography, particularly through the interventions of, offers another significant intellectual trajectory for this research. Ranajit Guha critiques elite-centric historiographical traditions and advocates the recovery of marginalized historical actors. Applying this framework to Lepakshi facilitates the historiographical recuperation of anonymous Silpins, muralists, stone workers and ritual labourers whose contributions have been overshadowed by narratives privileging dynastic patronage.

The visual culture theories of are equally instrumental in interpreting the mural and sculptural programmes of Lepakshi. W.J.T. Mitchell's proposition that images function as active cultural agents rather than passive representations allows the temple's visual corpus to be understood as an epistemological archive communicating ideology, rituality and civilizational memory.

Finally, the actor-network theory introduces a relational framework wherein humans, objects, materials and institutions collectively participate in cultural production. Bruno Latour's theoretical paradigm enables the temple to be interpreted as a networked assemblage involving artisans, granite, pigments, rituals, patrons and spatial technologies. Such a perspective dissolves rigid binaries between subject and object, thereby foregrounding the distributed agency inherent within sacred craftsmanship. Collectively these scholarly interventions establish the interdisciplinary foundations for present research.

### Research Methodology

This present study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology integrating architectural historiography, visual semiotics, epigraphic interpretation, phenomenological spatial analysis to investigate the artisanal consciousness. This methodological framework further incorporates subaltern historiography, material culture studies and Actor-Network Theory to reconstruct the agency of hereditary artisans, thereby situating Lepakshi as a palimpsestic chef-d'oeuvre of embodied labour, sacrality and cultural cosmopolitanism.

### I. Artisanal Historiography through Hereditary Artigiani and Craft Guilds

The artisanal historiography of the may be reconstructed through the collective agency of hereditary artigiani, Silpins, muralists, sthaphathis and guild based craft lineages whose embodied labour transformed the sacred terrain into a monumental chef-d'oeuvre of Vijayanagara cosmopolitanism. These artisanal fraternities

functioned not merely as a technical executors but as custodians of esoteric iconographic canons, ritual geometry and material semiotics transmitted through intergenerational pedagogies. The chiselled granite surfaces, monolithic interventions and chromatic fresco cycles collectively reveal a sophisticated craftsmanship sustained through sacred economy and devotional patronage.

The guild structures operated as epistemic institutions wherein architectural knowledge, sculptural syntax and ceremonial aesthetics were preserved through hereditary praxis. Their labour encoded theological metaphors, performative visualities and socio-cultural memory into the architectural corpus of the Lepakshi. Consequently, the temple emerges as a palimpsestic archive of artisanal consciousness where materiality transcended utilitarian construction to embody a metaphysical *raison d'être*. Through this historiographical recuperation, the anonymous artisan is repositioned as a central intellectual agent within South Indian sacred monumentalism.

### II. Materiality, Murals and Sculptural Semiotics in Vijayanagara Sacred Monumentalism

The materiality of granite, mural traditions and sculptural semiotics within Vijayanagara sacred monumentalism reveals an extraordinary confluence of technological virtuosity, ritual intentionality and metaphysical aesthetics. The granite transcends its geological componentality to become a sacralized medium of embodied cosmology. The monolithic Nandi and the colossal Nagalinga exemplifies the transformative agency of hereditary artigiani, whose chisels converted inert matter into animated theological presence. The tactile density of granite surfaces, intricately carved Yali-pillars and suspended architectural forms such as the celebrated Hanging Pillar collectively demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of structural equilibrium and ceremonial visuality.

Equally significant are the mural cycles adorning the ceilings of the Natya Mandapa, wherein mineral pigments and chromatic fresco techniques articulate a dynamic milieu of ritual narrativity. Episodes from Ramayana, Saiva mythology, and courtly processions are rendered through elongated physiognomies, rhythmic linearity and theatrical spatial compositions, revealing the performative aesthetics of Vijayanagara visual culture. These murals function not merely as decorative embellishments but as semiotic archives encoding sacred memory and imperial cosmopolitanism.

The sculptural semiotics of the Lepakshi further articulates a metaphysical *raison d'être* through iconographic orchestration. The recurring motifs of dancers, musicians, warriors and divine guardians signify the interrelationship between ritual

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performance and sacred space. Similar semiotic vocabularies may also be observed at and where sculptural dynamism embodies the ceremonial grandeur of Vijayanagara sacred monumentalism.

### III. Ritual Labour, Sacred Economy and Temple-centred Artisanal Networks

The interrelationship between ritual labour and sacred economy and temple-centred artisanal works constituted foundational milieu Vijayanagara sacred monumentation within the temple functioned not merely as a devotion's nucleus but as a socio-economic organism sustained through hereditary labour systems, agrarian endowments, merchant patronage and ritual redistribution, Silpins, muralistes, bronze casters, stone workers, musicians, dancers, oil pressers, flower gatherers, and traditional ritual officiants collectively participate in an intricate ceremonial economy wherein labour itself acquired sacred significance.

The hereditary artigiani operated through guild-oriented craft networks that transmitted architectural canons, iconographic grammar, and technical expertise across generations. Their artistic production was materially sustained through donations of agrarian lands, livestock, lamps, grains, jewelry and irrigation revenues recorded in temple inscriptions. Such endowments enabled the uninterrupted continuum of sculptural workshops, mural programmes and ritual festivities. For instance, the unfinished Kalyana Mandapa at Lepakshi preserves archaeological evidence of interrupted artisanal workflow, simultaneously revealing the dependence of sacred craftsmanship upon political patronage and economic stability.

Comparable sacred economies flourished at and where temple institutions sustained extensive networks of ritual specialists, craft guilds and mercantile communities. Consequently, Vijayanagara temples may be interpreted as ceremonial infrastructures of cultural production wherein economy, devotion and artisanal consciousness converged into a monumental chef-d'oeuvre of civilizational continuity.

### IV. Lepakshi Murals and Iconography as Visual Archives of Cultural Memory and Devotional Performativity

The mural traditions and iconographic programmes of Lepakshi function as profound visual archives of cultural memory, ritual consciousness and devotional performativity within the larger framework of Vijayanagara sacred monumentation. Executed upon plastered ceilings and architectural surfaces through mineral-based chromatic techniques, the Lepakshi murals transcend decorative embellishment to embody a

sophisticated epistemology of sacred narration. These pictorial compositions preserve the ceremonial imagination of 16th century South India by encoding theological symbolism, courtly aesthetics, performative traditions and socio-cultural identities into a dynamic visual language.

The celebrated mural depicting the marriage of Lord Siva and Parvati exemplifies the theatrical grandeur of Vijayanagara visual culture. Through elongated physiognomies, rhythmic contouring and chromatic orchestration, the composition transforms mythological narration into ritual spectacle. Similarly, the depictions of Veerabhadra, celestial musicians, dancers, sages, and royal attendants reveal an intricate interrelationship between sacred iconography and performative embodiment. These visual narratives simultaneously functioned as pedagogical instruments for devotees and as ceremonial extensions of temple ritualism.

The iconographic semiotics of Lepakshi further preserves invaluable ethnographic traces concerning costumes traditions, jewelry, weaponry, coiffures, musical instruments and dance postures associated with Vijayanagara milieu. The murals therefore operate as civilizational repositories documenting both sacred mythology and lived cultured experience. The ceiling paintings of the Natya Mandapa particularly reveal the performative continuum between temple ritual, classical dance traditions, and visual dramaturgy. Such imagery resonates with the ritual aesthetics visible at and where sacred imagery similarly mediates devotion through visual performance.

Subsequent to this, the murals and sculptural iconographies of Lepakshi may be interpreted as palimpsestic archives wherein memory, rituality, and artistic consciousness converge into a monumental chef-d'oeuvre of devotional visuality and cultural continuity.

### V. Interdisciplinary Frameworks: Phenomenology, Visual Culture Studies and Subaltern Historiography

The present study employs an interdisciplinary analytical framework integrating phenomenology, visual culture and Subaltern Historiography to reinterpret the temple as a dynamic archive of embodied craftsmanship and sacred performativity. Through phenomenological inquiry, the temple is understood not merely as a physical structure but as a lived experiential milieu wherein devotees, artisans, ritual specialists and spatial arrangements collectively participate in the production of sacrality. The tactile density of granite pillars, the spatial shifting of mandapas, and the ceremonial circulation of devotees create a sensory continuum that transforms architecture into

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a metaphysical *raison d'être*. The celebrated Hanging Pillar and monolithic Nagalinga exemplifies this experiential spatiality through their ritualized interaction with movement, touch and sensory perception.

Visual Culture studies further enables the interpretation of Lepakshi murals and sculptural programmes as active semiotic agents rather than passive aesthetic objects. The mural depicting the marriage of Lord Siva and Parvati along with iconographic representation of dancers, celestial musicians and royal attendants, encodes performative memory, courtly aesthetics, and theological symbolism into a visual grammar of devotional narration. Such imagery functions as a pedagogical and ceremonial interface between sacred mythology and lived ritual experience.

Simultaneously, Subaltern Historiography facilitates the recovery of marginalized artisanal voices obscured within elite-centric narratives of royal patronage. By foregrounding hereditary artigiani, muralists, stone workers, and ritual labour networks, this study reconstructs the invisible human agency underlying Vijayanagara monumentation. Comparable artisanal consciousness may also be discerned at and where sacred architecture similarly embodies the convergence of labour, devotion and visual semiotics within South Indian civilizational memory.

### **VI. Lepakshi as a Palimpsestic Chef-d'oeuvre of Imperial Cosmopolitanism**

It may be reinterpreted as a palimpsestic chef-d'oeuvre of imperial cosmopolitanism wherein diverse artistic vocabularies, ritual ecologies, and transcultural aesthetics converge into a monumental articulation of Vijayanagara civilizational identity. Far beyond its conventional classification as a regional Saivite shrine, Lepakshi embodies a dynamic milieu of architectural hybridity, artisanal mobility and ceremonial visuality that reflects the expansive cultural imagination of the Vijayanagara imperium.

The temple's sculptural syntax reveals the assimilation of multiple South Indian artistic traditions, including Chola plasticity, Hoysala ornamentation, Pandya iconographic density and Deccan spatial experimentation. The Yali pillars, monolithic Nagalinga and intricately chiselled Mandapas collectively demonstrate a cosmopolitan aesthetic consciousness cultivated through the circulation of hereditary artigiani, Silpins, muralistes and ritual specialists across imperial territories. Such artistic mobility transformed Lepakshi into a liminal contact zone where regional idioms synthesized into a unified ceremonial language of power and devotion.

The mural programmes of Lepakshi further reinforce this imperial cosmopolitanism through their visual incorporation of courtly attire, elaborate jewelry, martial iconographies, musical ensembles, and performative processions. The celebrated depiction of Lord Siva's celestial marriage not only communicates theological symbolism but also encodes the imperial aesthetics of Vijayanagara sovereignty. Persianate textile designs, elaborate turbans and courtly visual codes visible in certain fresco compositions reveal subtle intercultural exchanges between Indo-Islamic and South Indian artistic traditions. This transcultural visuality resonates with the cosmopolitan ritual aesthetics observable at and where sacred imagery similarly functioned as an instrument of imperial representation.

The unfinished Kalyana Mandapa additionally serves as a palimpsestic archive of interrupted artisanal labour and political temporality. Its partially carved pillars preserve visible traces of sculptural process, thereby revealing the material negotiations underlying monumental production. Lepakshi consequently emerges not as a static architectural entity but as a layered repository of labour memory, ritual performativity and imperial aspiration.

Ultimately, this temple may be understood as a monumental *raison d'être* of Vijayanagara cosmopolitanism wherein devotion, artistic hybridity, technological virtuosity and ceremonial sovereignty converge into an enduring civilizational archive of sacred monumentalism.

### **Findings**

1. Lepakshi foregrounds the agency of hereditary artigiani in Vijayanagara sacred monumentalism.
2. Granite, murals and sculptural semiotics embody ritual materiality and technological virtuosity.
3. Murals function as visual archives of cultural memory and devotional performativity.
4. Sacred economy sustained artisanal guilds, ritual labour and temple networks.
5. Interdisciplinary frameworks recover marginalized craft consciousness within Historiography.
6. Lepakshi represents a transcultural chef-d'oeuvre of imperial cosmopolitanism.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

1. Encourage interdisciplinary studies on artisanal historiography and sacred materiality.
2. Prioritize digital preservation of Lepakshi murals and sculptural heritage.

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3. Expand epigraphic research on sacred economy and ritual labour networks.
4. Promote comparative studies on Vijayanagara artistic cosmopolitanism.
5. Preserve hereditary artigiani traditions and intangible craft knowledge.
6. Reinterpret temples as living archives of labour, devotion and cultural memory.

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