



VIJAYANAGARA

Splendour in Ruins

Editor

George Michell

Preface

John Gollings

Contributors

Anila Verghese, George Michell, Sophie Gordon, Mike Ware



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from Waxed-paper Negative, 1856.
Back: Edmund David Lyon, Vitthala Temple, *Mandapas* and Chariot-
shrine, Albumen Print, 1867–68.
Frontispieces: Alexander Greenlaw, Vitthala Temple, Chariot-shrine and
East *Gopura*, Modern Positive (2007) from Waxed-paper Negative, 1856.
Front endpapers: Alexander Greenlaw, Hemakunta Hill, Gateway and
Temple, Modern Digital Positive (2007) from Waxed-paper Negative,
1855–56.
Back endpapers: Edmund David Lyon, Hampi Bazaar Street, albumen
Print, 1867–68.

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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 and employed, 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 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. This collection of images enables a theoretical analysis of the meaning of early location photography.

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 thoroughly, exactly and 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 in winter and therefore could never match the shadows.

In 1856, paper negatives were only sensitive to blue and ultraviolet light. This has 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 76, 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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

George Michell

Focusing on early photography at the great South Indian site of Vijayanagara, better known today as Hampi, a volume such as this is underpinned by more than twenty years of documentation and interpretation. A number of people need to be thanked for their encouragement and assistance during this period, beginning with Robert Skelton, then Head of the Indian Section at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, who first alerted me to the work of Alexander Greenlaw. I had just returned to London in March 1980 after my first field season of documentation at Vijayanagara earlier that January, when Robert summoned me to examine a set of about sixty waxed-paper negatives, dated 1855–56, that had temporarily been deposited at the museum. Imagine my excitement at the chance to view Vijayanagara as it was prior to any restoration work. John Gollings, the Australian photographer who had been with me at Vijayanagara on this first season, became fascinated with these remarkable early negatives, and soon embarked upon a re-photography project that pinpointed the exact spots where Greenlaw had pitched his tripod almost 150 years earlier. Much was to be learned of the fate of the site by comparing the work of these two photographers. I cannot thank John adequately for his commitment both and in all the years since.

Soon after I came upon the Greenlaw “hoard”, I met the American archaeologist Dr. John M. Fritz, whom I persuaded to join me at Vijayanagara in January 1981. John enthusiastically embraced the site, and together we formed the Vijayanagara Research Project to map the site and measure the monuments. This project was active over a period of more than twenty years, producing a number of monographs illustrated with maps and drawings, a few of which are reproduced in this volume. Early in the period, Dr. M.S. Nagaraja Rao, Director of the Karnataka Department of Archaeology and Museums, took an interest in the Greenlaw photographs and the re-photography project of John Gollings, and eventually published a book with the old and new photographs juxtaposed on facing pages. He also had these images enlarged for exhibition to be shown at a museum at the Vijayanagara site, where they can be seen to

this day. Dr. Nagaraja Rao must be thanked for creating the well-equipped field camp site in the middle of the ruins, that housed the Vijayanagara Research Project team over many years. Both he and John Fritz were exemplary colleagues and a constant source of personal encouragement.

To Ebrahim Alkazi I owe a personal debt, for it was at his invitation that I came to edit the present volume. Having purchased the Greenlaw negatives in 1998 from the collector who had first brought them to the Victoria & Albert Museum, Alkazi had been stimulated to seek out the work of other photographers who had visited Vijayanagara in the years immediately after Greenlaw. His unique assemblage of more than 150 images – all of which are reproduced here, though with the Greenlaw negatives mostly converted into positives (there being no original prints) – provides us with an unrivalled opportunity to examine the site as it was almost exactly 150 years ago. At the Alkazi Collection of Photography, London, I was ably assisted by Sophie Gordon, former curator, who has contributed to this volume an insightful chapter on the careers of the various photographers, as well as by Stephanie Roy Bharath. At Sepia International and The Alkazi Collection of Photography, Esa Epstein, Executive Director, and her staff offered every support. I also thank Dr. Anila Verghese and Dr. Mike Ware, who willingly made available their specialist knowledge in history and chemistry respectively, for the chapters they contributed to this book. Surendra Kumar and Virupaksha ably assisted at the site itself in precisely identifying the locations of several of the photographs. The volume would have not reached final form without the imaginative input and technical skills of Rahaab Allana, Curator of the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts in New Delhi.

Opposite

1. **NICHOLAS & CO.**, Kings' Balance with Anjanadri Hill in the Distance, Albumen Print, 1880s.





2. NICHOLAS & CO., Sister Rocks in the Urban Core, Albumen Print, 1880s.



3. NICHOLAS & CO., Bend in the Tungabhadra River, Albumen Print, 1880s.



4, 5. **NICHOLAS & CO.**, Three-part Panorama from the Top of Mahanavami Platform, Albumen Print, 1880s.



6. **NICHOLAS & CO.**, Three-part Panorama from the Top of Mahanavami Platform, Albumen Print, 1880s.



7. **EDMUND DAVID LYON**, Elephant Stables from the *Zenana* Enclosures, Albumen Print, 1867–68.



8. **NICHOLAS & CO.**, Malyavanta Hill, Steps to Raghunatha Temple, Albumen Print, 1880s.



Above
9. **NICHOLAS & CO.**, Kamalapura, Street Scene, Albumen Print, 1880s.

Following page
10. **NICHOLAS & CO.**, Queens' Bath, Interior, Albumen Print, 1880s.



PART ONE
INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1
VIJAYANAGARA IN HISTORY AND MEMORY
Anila Verghese

CHAPTER 2
VIJAYANAGARA REVEALED
George Michell