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ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE VEERABHADRA TEMPLE AT LEPAKSHI

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Abstract

The Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi represents one of the finest examples of temple architecture and artistic expression under the Vijayanagara Empire. This study examines the architectural features, patronage patterns, and cultural significance of the temple within its historical context. It explores the role of Virupanna and the royal support of Achyuta Deva Raya in shaping the monument. The research highlights the temple's spatial organization, sculptural richness, mural traditions, and epigraphical evidence, which collectively illustrate the synthesis of religion, art, and socio-economic structures. The study also evaluates the temple's continued religious relevance and its importance as a cultural archive of medieval South India. Through a multidisciplinary approach, this paper establishes Lepakshi as a key site for understanding Vijayanagara artistic and architectural traditions.

Keywords: Architecture , Temple Patronage, Murals, South Indian Art

1. Introduction

The Vijayanagara period marks a significant phase in South Indian history characterized by political consolidation, economic prosperity, and remarkable cultural achievements. Among its enduring contributions, temple architecture occupies a central position, serving both religious and socio-cultural functions.

The Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi, located in present-day Andhra Pradesh, stands as a monumental example of this tradition. Dedicated to Veerabhadra, a fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva, the temple is renowned for its architectural sophistication, intricate sculptures, and extensive mural paintings. Its association with Virupanna, a prominent official under Achyuta Deva Raya, further enriches its historical and cultural narrative.

This study aims to analyze the architectural layout, artistic features, and patronage systems of the Lepakshi temple, situating it within the broader framework of Vijayanagara art and society.

2. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, combining architectural analysis, epigraphical study, and art historical interpretation. Primary data is drawn from inscriptions found within the temple complex, which provide evidence of patronage, land grants, and institutional support.

Architectural features such as mandapas, vimanas, and corridors are examined through structural and stylistic analysis. Sculptural and mural elements are analyzed to understand iconographic themes and artistic techniques. Secondary sources, including historical accounts and scholarly works on Vijayanagara art and architecture, are also consulted to contextualize the findings.

This integrated approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the temple as both a religious monument and a cultural artifact.



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3. The Veerabhadra Temple- Lepakshi

The Veerabhadra Temple, Lepakshi stands as one of the most remarkable monuments of the Vijayanagara Empire, exemplifying the artistic, architectural, and cultural achievements of the period. Situated in the village of Lepakshi, in the Hindupur region of Anantapur district, the temple occupies a prominent position on the Kurmasaila hillock, enhancing both its visual grandeur and sacred significance.

Dedicated to Virabhadra, the temple is not merely a center of religious worship but also a repository of exceptional artistic expression. Its architectural layout, characterized by spacious mantapas, intricately carved pillars, and well-defined structural components, reflects the mature phase of Vijayanagara temple architecture. The sculptural richness and refined craftsmanship evident throughout the complex demonstrate the technical expertise and aesthetic sensibilities of contemporary artisans.

In addition to its architectural significance, the temple is renowned for its exquisite mural paintings, which adorn the ceilings and walls of various mandapas. These paintings, depicting mythological themes and courtly life, offer important evidence for the study of Vijayanagara art and iconography. The integration of architecture, sculpture, and painting within a single sacred complex underscores the temple's role as a vibrant center of religious, artistic, and cultural activity.

4. The Role of Virupanna in the Construction of the Lepakshi Temple

Beyond legend, Virupanna emerges as a historically significant figure. He was a royal officer in the service of Achyuta Deva Raya, initially serving as a door-keeper and later rising to positions of greater administrative importance, possibly as a provincial authority in regions such as Penukonda and Chandragiri.

His family also played a prominent role in temple patronage. His brothers, Viranna Nayaka and Chikka Mallappanayaka, were associated with several religious constructions. Together, they contributed to the building of temple enclosures and supported important shrines across the region, including those at Narayanavanam and Kalahasti. These activities indicate that Virupanna was not merely a local official but part of a broader network of elite patrons involved in religious and cultural development during the Vijayanagara period.

Virupanna's contributions to temple construction reflect his deep religious commitment. He was a devoted follower of Lord Venkateswara of Tirumala and is recorded to have made numerous valuable offerings. His devotion extended equally to Veerabhadra at Lepakshi, where he sponsored major architectural and ritual activities.

Epigraphical records provide concrete evidence of his patronage. An inscription dated 1537 A.D. records his purchase of lands at Kalanuragrahara, which he donated to the temple. Such endowments ensured the maintenance of temple rituals and highlight the role of elite individuals in sustaining religious institutions. His continued involvement in temple affairs is further confirmed by inscriptions up to 1538 A.D., suggesting that he remained active long after the supposed blinding incident.

While the story of Virupanna's self-blinding remains a powerful element of local tradition, historical evidence raises questions about its authenticity. The presence of inscriptions dated after the alleged event indicates that he lived and continued his patronage activities. This suggests that the narrative may have evolved as a symbolic tale emphasizing loyalty and sacrifice rather than a strictly historical account.

Additionally, murals within the temple are believed to depict figures identified as Virupanna, reinforcing his association with the temple's construction and patronage. These artistic representations further support his prominent role in the temple's history.



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The growth and sustenance of the Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi were not solely dependent on individual patronage but were significantly supported by royal authority and local institutions. The reign of Achyuta Deva Raya marked an important phase in the temple's development, as he extended direct patronage through grants and endowments. Notably, inscriptions record his donation of villages to the temple of Viresvara at Lepakshi, reflecting the close association between the Vijayanagara Empire and religious establishments.

In addition to royal support, local assemblies such as the *mahajanas* played an active role in sustaining the temple. Records of land grants, including the village of Kanchasamudram (also known as Pratapadevarayapura), illustrate the collaborative involvement of regional elites. These contributions highlight the temple's position as a vital socio-religious institution supported by both the state and the local community.

5. Royal Patronage and Epigraphical Evidence of Support at Lepakshi

The inscriptions found within the Lepakshi temple complex provide a detailed account of its extensive patronage network. A record from 1533 A.D. mentions the grant of three villages—Hampanahalli, Kancarahalli, and Timmagondanahalli—which were collectively designated as *Venkatadri-samudra*, indicating their association with Prince Kumara Venkatadri. This demonstrates the involvement of the royal family in strengthening the temple's economic base.

An inscription dated 1534 A.D. further records a direct donation by Achyuta Deva Raya, who granted a village for the worship of Veerabhadra. The same period also witnessed contributions from merchant communities, particularly those associated with local fairs at Viresvaradevarayapura. These merchants allocated toll revenues and other incomes to support temple rituals and offerings across its three principal shrines, reflecting active participation of the commercial sector in religious patronage.

The epigraphical evidence also reveals the role of local communities in sustaining the temple's economic and ritual functions. An inscription from 1537 A.D. records the donation of the Tala-Parigi irrigation channel by the *mahajanas* of Nagaragere to the shrines of Papavinasadeva, Raghunathadeva, and Viresvaradeva. This highlights not only religious devotion but also the integration of agrarian resources into temple maintenance.

Further donations during the same period include the grant of the village Nandicerla by the chief Achyutaraya Mallapanna and the transfer of Sadashivapura by Virapannaya of Penugonda, who purchased it from Brahmin landholders before donating it to the temple. Another village, Chikanandiceruvu (also known as Devarayapura), was also endowed to the temple, strengthening its landholdings and financial stability. These records collectively indicate that the temple functioned as an important economic institution, supported through land revenues, irrigation resources, and community contributions.

6. Mantapas and Artistic Elements of the Virabhadra Temple at Lepakshi

The temple follows a well-defined architectural plan typical of South Indian temple construction. The central shrine or *garbhagriha* (sanctum sanctorum) houses the principal deity, and is connected to the *antarala* (antechamber), which acts as a transitional space. This leads to the *ardhamandapa* and the expansive *natyamandapa* (dance hall), designed for ritual performances and congregational activities.

The temple complex is accessed through a *gopura* (gateway tower), now partially ruined, yet indicative of the monumentality of Vijayanagara entrances. The northern gateway serves as the primary entrance, leading into pillared halls adorned with elaborately carved columns. The entire layout demonstrates a careful balance between sacred space and public ritual areas, reflecting both religious and social functions.



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One of the most remarkable features of the temple is its mandapas, particularly the *natyamandapa* and the unfinished *kalyanamandapa*. The latter was intended as a ceremonial hall for the divine wedding rituals but remains incomplete, adding a distinctive historical character to the monument.

The pillars in these halls are masterpieces of stone carving. They are richly ornamented with depictions of deities, celestial beings, dancers, and scenes from mythology. Among them, the famous “hanging pillar” stands out as an extraordinary example of engineering skill, appearing to slightly hover above the ground. This feature has fascinated both scholars and visitors, symbolizing the technical sophistication of Vijayanagara artisans.

The Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi represents the architectural brilliance of the Vijayanagara Empire, particularly through its diverse and functionally significant mantapas (pillared halls). These structures not only served ritual and ceremonial purposes but also functioned as spaces for social, cultural, and artistic expression. Each mantapa within the temple complex is distinguished by its layout, pillar design, and sculptural ornamentation, reflecting the stylistic richness of the period.

The Kalyanamantapa and Sculptural Excellence

The Kalyanamantapa, located in the south-western part of the inner enclosure, is one of the most impressive yet unfinished structures in the temple complex. Designed as a ceremonial hall for divine marriage rituals, it contains approximately eighty intricately carved pillars. These pillars vary in design, featuring single, double, and multiple projections, as well as sculptural representations of deities and celestial figures.

Despite its incomplete state, the Kalyanamantapa stands as a testament to the advanced craftsmanship of Vijayanagara artisans. Its unfinished condition suggests an abrupt halt in construction, possibly due to political or administrative disruptions.

The Natyamantapa and Decorative Program

The Natyamantapa (dance hall), situated near the main entrance, is another architectural highlight. Supported by numerous elaborately carved pillars, it forms a spacious hall used for ritual performances and gatherings. The pillars are adorned with depictions of deities, sages, dancers, and musicians, including figures such as Brahma, Narada, Rambha, and Nataraja.

The ceiling of this hall is particularly noteworthy, featuring a large lotus motif with radiating petals, symbolically representing cosmic order. The ceiling panels are further embellished with mural paintings, illustrating mythological narratives and enhancing the visual richness of the space.

7. Sculptural Features: The Naga-Linga Motif

Adjacent to one of the mantapas is a remarkable sculptural composition—a massive serpent (*nāga*) with multiple hoods forming a protective canopy over a Shiva linga. The serpent coils around the pedestal, symbolizing cosmic energy and divine protection. This monolithic sculpture is one of the most iconic features of the Lepakshi temple, combining religious symbolism with artistic excellence.



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8. Architectural Features of the Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi

Pillared Corridor and Circulation Design

The Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi, a masterpiece of the Vijayanagara Empire, exhibits a highly organized spatial design, particularly in its pillared corridors. A flight of steps descends from the *natyamantapa* to an extensive corridor surrounding the *mukhamantapa*. This corridor is articulated through multiple rows of pillars arranged in a systematic manner, creating a rhythmic architectural pattern.

The northern wing consists of two parallel rows of pillars, while large natural boulders integrated into the design divide the eastern and western sections into smaller segments. The southern wing, in contrast, presents a continuous row of pillars, emphasizing axial movement within the complex. The cornice running along the corridor is distinctly moulded with a concave upper profile and a convex lower section, adding a refined decorative element to the structure.

Sanctum, Antarala, and Structural Base

The *garbhagriha* (sanctum sanctorum) and the *antarala* (vestibule) form the sacred core of the temple. Their base (*adhithana*) is composed of multiple mouldings arranged in a hierarchical sequence, including *upana*, *patta*, *padma*, *tripatta*, *gala*, and *alingapattika*. These elements provide both structural stability and decorative refinement.

In contrast to the richly ornamented mandapas, the walls of the sanctum and vestibule are relatively plain, though traces of painting suggest that they were once adorned with vibrant murals. This restrained treatment emphasizes the sanctity and spiritual focus of the inner shrine.

Vimana and Superstructure

The *vimana* (tower) above the sanctum is a two-tiered (*dvitala*) structure, incorporating architectural elements such as *kūta*, *pañjara*, and *sālā* motifs. The upper tier is surmounted by a platform supporting sculptural figures of *Nandi* at the corners, symbolizing devotion to Shiva.

The superstructure culminates in a circular *śikhara*, characteristic of the Vesara style, blending northern and southern architectural traditions. An imposing image of Veerabhadra crowns the structure, reinforcing the temple's dedication to the deity.

A short distance from the temple stands the monumental Nandi, one of the largest monolithic sculptures in India. Carved from a single block of granite, the figure is depicted in a seated posture with its head held slightly elevated, differing from the conventional submissive pose.

The sculpture is notable for its balanced proportions, refined detailing, and ornamental carvings, reflecting the high level of craftsmanship achieved during the Vijayanagara period. It serves as both a devotional symbol and an artistic landmark associated with the temple.

9. Religious and Cultural Significance of the Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi

The Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi is not only an architectural monument but also a vibrant center of religious activity. The presiding deity, Veerabhadra—an intense manifestation of Lord Shiva—is revered for his protective and destructive



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attributes. Devotees visit the temple to seek blessings, perform rituals, and participate in daily worship practices that continue an unbroken tradition from the Vijayanagara period.

Among the various religious events, Maha Shivaratri holds special significance. Celebrated with great devotion and ritual fervor, it attracts large numbers of pilgrims from across the region, reinforcing the temple's enduring importance in the religious life of the community.

The cultural importance of the temple extends beyond its religious function. It stands as a symbol of the artistic and cultural achievements of the Vijayanagara Empire, preserving traditions of architecture, sculpture, and painting. The temple functions as a repository of historical memory, reflecting the socio-religious life of medieval South India.

Equally significant is its association with the legend of Virupanna, whose story of devotion and sacrifice has been preserved in local tradition. The unfinished Kalyanamantapa is often linked to this narrative, adding a layer of emotional and cultural depth to the monument. Such legends contribute to the temple's identity as a site where history and mythology intertwine.

10. Mural Paintings and Artistic Expression

One of the most remarkable artistic features of the Lepakshi temple is its extensive mural paintings, which rank among the finest examples of Vijayanagara art. These murals depict a wide range of themes, including episodes from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and the life of Veerabhadra, as well as representations of deities and celestial beings.

Executed on wet lime plaster using natural pigments, the paintings are characterized by vibrant colors, fluid lines, and expressive compositions. The dynamic postures of the figures convey movement and vitality, offering valuable insights into the artistic conventions and narrative traditions of the time. These murals serve not only as decorative elements but also as visual texts that communicate religious ideas and cultural values.

11. Discussion

The Lepakshi temple complex demonstrates a highly evolved architectural plan, including the *garbhagriha*, *antarala*, *mukhamantapa*, and *natyamantapa*. The presence of multiple mantapas, pillared corridors, and subsidiary shrines reflects both functional diversity and aesthetic sophistication. The unfinished Kalyanamantapa, with its intricately carved pillars, exemplifies the technical excellence of Vijayanagara artisans.

The temple's sculptural program includes richly decorated pillars, friezes, and iconic elements such as the monolithic Nandi. The carvings depict deities, celestial beings, and mythological narratives, showcasing a blend of symbolic meaning and artistic precision. The use of yali brackets, ornate capitals, and narrative panels highlights the stylistic maturity of the period.

The murals of Lepakshi are among the finest surviving examples of Vijayanagara painting. Executed on lime plaster using natural pigments, they depict scenes from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and Shaivite traditions. These paintings provide valuable insights into contemporary religious beliefs, costume styles, and artistic conventions.

Inscriptions reveal a well-organized system of patronage involving royal authority, local elites, merchants, and agrarian communities. Achyuta Deva Raya's donations and the contributions of Virupanna highlight the close relationship between state power and religious institutions. Land grants and endowments ensured the temple's economic sustainability and ritual continuity.



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The temple continues to function as an active center of worship, particularly during festivals such as Maha Shivaratri. Its association with the legend of Virupanna adds a layer of cultural memory, while its artistic and architectural features preserve the heritage of the Vijayanagara period. The temple thus serves as both a living religious institution and a repository of historical knowledge.

12. Conclusion

The Veerabhadra Temple at Lepakshi stands as a remarkable testament to the architectural brilliance, artistic excellence, and cultural vitality of the Vijayanagara Empire. The monument embodies a harmonious synthesis of structural planning, sculptural refinement, and pictorial expression, reflecting the advanced technical and aesthetic achievements of the period.

The temple's architectural layout—comprising intricately carved pillars, elaborate mantapas, pillared corridors, and well-defined shrine complexes—demonstrates a high degree of craftsmanship and spatial organization. Its sculptural and decorative programs, including narrative friezes and symbolic motifs, enhance both its visual appeal and religious meaning. Equally significant are the mural paintings, which serve as valuable visual records of contemporary religious beliefs, artistic conventions, and cultural life.

Epigraphical evidence reveals a well-structured system of patronage involving royal authority, local elites, merchant groups, and agrarian communities. The contributions of Achyuta Deva Raya and the prominent official Virupanna highlight the close relationship between political power and religious institutions. While the legend of Virupanna adds a layer of cultural memory and moral symbolism, historical records firmly establish his role as a significant patron and administrator.

The temple also holds enduring religious importance as an active center of worship dedicated to Veerabhadra, a fierce manifestation of Lord Shiva. Its continued ritual practices and festivals sustain its relevance within the contemporary cultural landscape. Monumental features such as the monolithic Nandi and the diverse subsidiary shrines further reinforce its ritual and symbolic significance.

In essence, the Lepakshi temple represents the confluence of religion, art, and architecture in medieval South India. It functions not only as a sacred space but also as a cultural archive preserving the legacy of Vijayanagara civilization. Therefore, its preservation and continued scholarly study are essential for a deeper understanding of South Indian heritage and the broader historical processes that shaped it.

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