CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 66. No. S9, 2026 (Special Issue S9)

The Archaeology of the Woven: Textile Materiality, Craft Knowledge and Imperial Aesthetics in the Vijayanagara period

Dr. Balaram Katchalla[1], Dr. Ravikumar Kodali[2], Dr. Kasturi Appala Naidu [3],Manyala Siva Kumar[4], Kota Ram Gangadhara Rao[5]

[1]Principal, Vijetha Colleges of Education, Somarajupalli, Singarayakonda (Mandal), Prakasam Dist., Andhra Pradesh, India.
[2]Faculty in Sculpture, Dept. of Fine Arts, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, A.P., India.
[3]Academic Consultant, Department of Sculpture, College of Fine Arts,
Dr. YSR Architecture and Fine Art University, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh, India.
[4]Faculty in Sculpture, Dept. of Fine Arts, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, A.P., India.
[5]Research Scholar, Dept. of History and Archaeology, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjunanagar, Andhra Pradesh, India.

ABSTRACT
This study excavates the archaeology of the woven within the Vijayanagara Empire (c. 1336-1565 CE), centred in the Tungabhadra, Krishna, and Kaveri cultural region of peninsular South India. Interpreting textiles as repositories of savoir-faire, embodied memory and imperial aesthetics, it draws upon inscriptions, sculptures, murals, literary narratives, traveller accounts and material traces. The study reconstructs the chaîneopératoire of fibre, thread, loom and cloth, while examining sartorial practices as markers of hierarchy, identity and sovereignty. Vijayanagara textiles thus emerge as a forma culturale-a material language through which craft knowledge, commerce and imperial magnificence were woven into a distinctive South Indian visual order.
Keywords: Textile Materiality; Woven Archaeology; Savoir-faire; Craft Epistemology; Sartorial Semiotics; Imperial Aesthetics; Chaîne Opératoire; Material Culture; Vijayanagara Cosmopolitanism

1. INTRODUCTION

Textiles constitute one of the most elusive yet intellectually fertile dimensions of the material culture of the Vijayanagara Empire (c. 1336–1565 CE). Across the cultural landscapes of the Tungabhadra, Krishna, Kaveri and adjoining regions of peninsular South India, woven materials participated in the articulation of social identity, ritual distinction, commercial exchange and imperial splendour. Yet, unlike stone, bronze or architectural remains, textiles are inherently fugitive archaeological entities. Their organic fibres rarely survive intact, compelling the historian and archaeologist to reconstruct the textile world through dispersed visual, epigraphic, literary and material traces. The present study therefore approaches Vijayanagara textiles through an interdisciplinary archaeology of the woven, treating cloth not merely as an expendable commodity but as a repository of technological memory, embodied knowledge and cultural meaning.

The conceptual vocabulary of materialité provides an important point of departure. Textile materiality encompasses the physical properties of fibre, yarn, dye, weave, texture and ornament, while simultaneously acknowledging the cultural meanings inscribed upon them. The transformation of raw fibre into finished cloth may be understood through the French notion of chaîneopératoire, the sequential constellation of technical gestures through which material is converted into an aesthetic and functional artefact. Within this continuum, the artisan's savoir-faire assumes particular significance. Craft knowledge was neither exclusively textual nor mechanically reproducible; it was transmitted through apprenticeship, bodily dexterity, sensory perception and accumulated experience. The loom consequently becomes more than a technological apparatus: it constitutes a site where knowledge, labour and creativity converge.

Vijayanagara textiles also participated in an elaborate esthétique of sovereignty. Clothing, ornamented fabrics, patterned surfaces and luxurious materials contributed to the visual construction of rank and authority. Sculptures at Hampi and other Vijayanagara centres, together with the celebrated murals of Lepakshi, preserve an invaluable visual archive of garments, drapery, textile patterning and sartorial differentiation. Such representations reveal how the dressed body became a forma culturale, articulating distinctions of status, occupation, gender, ritual position and political proximity.

The study further situates textile production within networks of artisans, merchants, markets and long-distance commerce. Cotton, silk, dyes, yarns and finished fabrics moved through interconnected economic and cultural circuits, transforming textiles into agents of circolazioneculturale. Consequently, the Vijayanagara textile tradition emerges not as an isolated craft phenomenon but as a dynamic confluence of indigenous technological traditions, cosmopolitan exchanges and imperial patronage. By reading inscriptions, sculptures, murals, literary sources and traveller accounts in conjunction, this study seeks to recover the invisible histories embedded within the woven

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

surface and to demonstrate that textiles constituted a sophisticated material language of craftsmanship, sociality and imperial imagination.

Aims

The principal aim of this study is to reconstruct the textile world of the Vijayanagara Empire (c. 1336–1565 CE) through an interdisciplinary archaeology of the woven, interpreting textiles as repositories of material knowledge, artisanal agency, social identity and imperial esthétique. It seeks to reveal how fibre, technique, ornament, costume and circulation constituted a sophisticated forma culturale within the visual and socio-economic landscape of peninsular South India.

Objectives

1. To investigate the material constitution of Vijayanagara textiles-including fibre, yarn, dye, weave, texture and ornament-through the conceptual lens of materialité, establishing their technological and aesthetic significance.
2. To reconstruct the chaîneopératoire of textile production by examining spinning, weaving, dyeing, pattern-making and finishing techniques, thereby foregrounding the embodied savoir-faire of artisans.
3. To identify weaving communities, craft specialists and merchant networks, examining their agency, occupational identities and participation in the socio-economic structures of the Vijayanagara polity.
4. To analyse sculptures, murals and architectural representations as a visual archive of textiles, interpreting drapery, costume, ornament and patterned surfaces through semiotica and sartorial aesthetics.
5. To examine textiles as instruments of social differentiation, ritual identity and political representation, particularly in relation to courtly and elite consumption.
6. To explore the circulation of textile materials, technologies and aesthetic conventions across regional and maritime networks, situating Vijayanagara within a wider circolazioneculturale.
7. To synthesise epigraphic, archaeological, literary and visual evidence to recover the cultural biography of textiles and establish their significance within Vijayanagara material culture.
8. To demonstrate that textiles functioned not merely as commodities but as dynamic carriers of memory, identity, craftsmanship and imperial magnificence, thereby expanding the interpretive horizons of South Indian textile archaeology.

2.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interdisciplinary and interpretive methodology to reconstruct the textile cultures of the Vijayanagara Empire (c. 1336–1565 CE). The research integrates archaeological, epigraphic, iconographic, art-historical and material-cultural approaches to illuminate the elusive histories of woven production. Primary evidence comprising inscriptions, sculptural representations, Lepakshi murals, architectural ornamentation and relevant archaeological remains will be critically examined alongside literary texts and accounts of European and Persian travellers.

The technological dimension will be interpreted through the French concept of chaîneopératoire, tracing the transformation of fibre into yarn, woven surface and finished textile, while the artisans' embodied savoir-faire will be examined as transmitted technological knowledge. Comparative visual analysis will investigate costume, drapery, pattern, texture and ornament as manifestations of esthétique and sartorial semiotica. Epigraphic evidence will be correlated with literary and material sources to identify weaving communities, occupational structures, patronage and commercial networks. A contextual and comparative analisi will subsequently situate Vijayanagara textiles within regional and transregional circuits of cultural exchange. This triangulated methodology seeks to reconstruct textile materiality as both tangible craft practice and intangible cultural memory.

3.REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The historiography of Vijayanagara textiles occupies an intellectually fertile intersection between economic history, archaeology, art history, epigraphy, anthropology and the study of material culture. Yet the textile itself remains an elusive historical object. Unlike stone architecture, bronze sculpture or monumental inscriptions, woven materials are materially perishable and therefore survive only sporadically in the archaeological record. The textile history of Vijayanagara must consequently be reconstructed through a dispersed archive comprising inscriptions, literary references, sculptural representations, mural paintings, traveller narratives, commercial evidence and the continuing technological memory of weaving communities. This evidentiary condition makes textile research particularly amenable to an interdisciplinary archéologie du textile, in which absence is not treated as an epistemological deficiency but as an invitation to reconstruct material histories through convergent traces.

Among the foundational studies, Vijaya Ramaswamy's Textiles and Weavers in Medieval South India remains indispensable. Published by Oxford University Press in 1985, the study examines the South Indian textile industry between approximately the tenth and seventeenth centuries, with particular attention to weaving centres, seaports, merchant groups, loom technology, taxation, trade, social organisation and the status of weavers. Its geographical

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

and chronological breadth establishes an essential historical framework for understanding the Vijayanagara textile economy within longer trajectories of South Indian textile production. Ramaswamy's contribution is particularly significant because she refuses to treat textiles merely as commercial commodities. By foregrounding the social location and historical experiences of weavers, she brings the artisan into the centre of textile historiography. Her subsequent writings on medieval textile technology, master weavers, folk traditions and silk communities further demonstrate that textile production must be understood through the relationship between technical knowledge, social organisation and economic circulation.

Ramaswamy's scholarship therefore provides an important foundation for the present investigation, particularly in relation to the social history of weaving. Her reconstruction of weaving communities and production systems permits textile to be approached as an embodied savoir-faire, rather than simply as a finished object. Her work on silk and silk-weaving communities in medieval peninsular India further broadens this perspective by examining the cultural imagination of silk, the historical location and migration of silk-producing groups, and the relationship between production and trade. Nevertheless, the principal orientation of this scholarship remains historical-economic and socio-occupational. The present study seeks to extend this trajectory towards a more explicitly material and visual interpretation in which the physical properties, aesthetic vocabulary and representational life of textiles become central analytical categories.

Carla M. Sinopoli's archaeological and anthropological scholarship constitutes another decisive point of departure. Her influential article, "The Organization of Craft Production at Vijayanagara, South India," published in American Anthropologist in 1988, examines textile and ceramic production through a comparative model of specialised craft organisation. Sinopoli distinguishes between administered, centralised and non-centralised modes of production and argues that the organisation of production was closely related to political and administrative regulation, including the manufacture, distribution and use of specialised goods. For Vijayanagara textiles, she proposes a centralised form of productive organisation based principally upon historical documentation.

The significance of Sinopoli's contribution lies in her movement from the textile as commodity to the textile as an index of political economy. Her archaeological approach introduces questions of organisation, institutional regulation, labour and distribution that complicate purely stylistic histories of textiles. Equally important is her subsequent investigation of identity and social action among South Indian craft producers of the Vijayanagara period. Drawing upon archaeological and inscriptional evidence, Sinopoli examines the manner in which economic, political, demographic and social transformations affected craft production and the identities of producers. This approach is particularly valuable for the present study because it makes artisan agency visible within the larger imperial structure.

Sinopoli's work also opens a methodological pathway towards what may be termed material epistemologia: the understanding of social organisation through the material processes by which objects are produced. Her studies demonstrate that craft production cannot be separated from political authority, spatial organisation and social relations. Yet ceramics provide a more archaeologically persistent corpus than textiles. Consequently, the present research adapts the archaeological logic of craft-production studies to an essentially fugitive material-cloth-whose historical presence must frequently be inferred rather than excavated directly.

The scholarship on Vijayanagara architecture and art provides another essential evidentiary foundation. The monumental landscape of Hampi, together with associated centres such as Tadipatri, Lepakshi and other Vijayanagara-period sites, preserves extensive sculptural evidence concerning costume, bodily presentation, ornament and drapery. Architectural historians, particularly George Michell and scholars working on Vijayanagara visual culture, have demonstrated the importance of sculpture and architectural ornament for understanding the aesthetic and political environment of the empire. Within this visual archive, clothing assumes a significance that extends beyond mere ethnographic description. The sculpted body becomes a surface upon which rank, occupation, gender, ritual status and political authority are materially inscribed.

The murals of the Virabhadra Temple at Lepakshi constitute an especially important corpus. Brigitte Khan Majlis's study, "Stripes, Checks, and Flowers: Textile Patterns in the Murals of Lepakshi, South India," examines the textile patterns represented in the sixteenth-century murals. The paintings contain more than five hundred figures whose costumes provide a valuable visual record of textile forms and patterns associated with the Vijayanagara period. Majlis identifies stripes, checks, floral designs and other patterned surfaces and compares them with surviving textile traditions, suggesting possible technological correspondences. Her study also indicates that the painted textiles reflect extensive commercial and cultural connections, including relationships with Gujarat, the Coromandel Coast, Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran.

Majlis's research is particularly significant for the present paper because it demonstrates the potential of mural painting as a document visuel of textile history. The textile represented in paint is not the textile itself; nevertheless, its visual vocabulary preserves information concerning pattern, colour, garment construction, social differentiation and cultural contact. The painted surface therefore functions as a mediated textile archive. This

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

invites an interpretive movement from representation to material reconstruction—a passaggio from image to object, from visual sign to technological possibility.

Recent scholarship on silk culture during the Vijayanagara period further enriches this field. Studies of silk weaving have explored the economic and cultural significance of silk, the communities associated with its production, technological processes and the circulation of silk within wider peninsular networks. Research on Vijayanagara courtly culture has also examined garments such as the kabayi and kullayi, demonstrating the complexity of sartorial interaction between indigenous South Indian traditions and Islamic, Persianate and other transregional influences. The evidence from Lepakshi, Tadipatri and Hampi reveals that tunics, caps and other garments could participate in changing patterns of social distinction and cultural affiliation. Particularly revealing is the contrast between the long, elaborate garments of the donor figures Viranna and Virupanna at Lepakshi and the shorter tunics of their attendants. The difference suggests that garment length and textile quality could function as visual markers of status.

This evidence complicates any simplistic binary between "indigenous" and "foreign" costume. Vijayanagara sartorial culture appears instead as a dynamic forma culturale, continuously absorbing, adapting and re-signifying external forms. The adoption or transformation of particular garments did not necessarily signify passive cultural imitation; rather, imported or transregional forms could be incorporated into local structures of prestige, identity and political representation. Textile materiality thus becomes a particularly sensitive medium for tracing processes of cultural negotiation.

The literature concerning Vijayanagara political economy further clarifies the relationship between textiles, commerce and imperial power. Textile production was embedded within networks involving artisans, merchants, markets, temples, courts and regional centres. Ramaswamy's research identifies weaving centres, ports, merchant groups, taxation systems and commercial networks across medieval South India, demonstrating the extent to which textiles participated in wider economic structures. Sinopoli's work complements this economic perspective by emphasising the organisational relationship between craft production and political administration. Together, these studies reveal that the textile economy was neither peripheral nor autonomous: it was entangled with structures of authority, resource mobilisation and distribution.

The literary corpus offers another dimension to this historiography. Vijayanagara literary works, especially Krishnadevaraya's Amuktamalyada, preserve terminology and conceptual references relevant to commerce, social organisation, material life and political economy. When read alongside inscriptions, such texts can help reconstruct the vocabulary through which textiles, artisans and commercial practices were conceptualised. Traveller accounts provide another external perspective. The observations of figures such as Niccolò de' Conti, Abdur Razzaq, Duarte Barbosa, Domingo Paes and Fernão Nuniz contribute descriptions of courtly magnificence, markets, clothing, luxury commodities and urban consumption. Their testimony must necessarily be treated critically, since travel narratives are mediated by cultural expectation, selective observation and rhetorical representation. Nevertheless, when triangulated with indigenous textual and visual evidence, they provide valuable comparative testimony.

Epigraphic scholarship constitutes a particularly important component of the literature because inscriptions preserve traces of occupational identities, donations, taxation, privileges, settlement patterns and relationships between craft communities and religious institutions. The inscriptional record allows the historian to move beyond the anonymous "weaver" towards historically situated producers and communities. Ramaswamy's studies of weavers and Sinopoli's work on craft producers demonstrate the interpretive possibilities of such evidence. The present research will extend this approach by correlating epigraphic terminology with visual representations and technological evidence, thereby constructing a more integrated analisi of textile production.

The literature also reveals an important conceptual transition in the study of crafts. Earlier approaches frequently privileged finished objects, stylistic classifications and economic exchange. More recent material-culture scholarship increasingly emphasises processes of making, embodied knowledge, agency, technological practice and the social biography of things. Within this intellectual trajectory, the French concept of chaîneopératoire is particularly productive. It enables textile production to be understood as a sequential constellation of technical gestures-from fibre preparation and spinning to dyeing, warping, weaving, pattern formation and finishing. Such an approach shifts attention from the completed cloth towards the accumulated knowledge embedded within its making.

The Italian concept of saper fare, closely related to French savoir-faire, similarly enables craft knowledge to be conceptualised as embodied competence. The weaver's knowledge cannot be reduced to written instruction. It is acquired through repetition, sensory discrimination, bodily coordination, apprenticeship and practical experimentation. In this sense, the loom becomes a site of knowledge production. The textile is consequently not simply an artefact but the materialised outcome of a complex epistemic process.

A further historiographical strand concerns the relationship between textiles and social identity. Ramaswamy's work has been especially influential in demonstrating that weaving communities possessed historically specific social identities and institutional relationships. Sinopoli similarly demonstrates that craft producers were active

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

participants in processes of social change rather than passive recipients of state regulation. This perspective enables the present study to interpret textiles as instruments of social articulation. Garment, fibre, colour, pattern and texture could signify occupation, rank, gender, ritual position and proximity to political authority.

The visual evidence of Lepakshi is particularly valuable in this regard. The differentiation between elite and attendant garments suggests a sartorial hierarchy encoded through length, material and ornament. The mural therefore becomes a form of stratigraphievestimentaire, a sartorial stratigraphy through which social hierarchy is rendered visible upon the body. This concept allows clothing to be interpreted not simply as costume but as a material semiotic system.

Another important theme emerging from recent scholarship is textile cosmopolitanism. Vijayanagara's textile culture cannot be adequately understood within a closed territorial framework. Evidence for silk, patterned textiles, foreign garments and long-distance trade indicates sustained interaction between the South Indian interior, the Coromandel littoral and wider Indian Ocean circuits. Majlis's analysis of Lepakshi patterns, for instance, points towards connections with Gujarat, Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran and the Coromandel textile world. Such evidence transforms the textile from a local craft product into a mobile cultural agent.

This mobility is central to the concept of circolazioneculturale. Textiles carried designs, techniques, fibres, colours, aesthetic conventions and social meanings across geographical boundaries. The circulation of cloth therefore simultaneously constituted an economic process and an aesthetic exchange. Vijayanagara's textile world may consequently be understood as a cosmopolitan field in which indigenous craft traditions encountered and selectively assimilated transregional forms.

Despite the considerable richness of existing scholarship, an identifiable research gap remains. The historiography has produced substantial studies of weaving communities, textile economies, craft organisation, silk production, commercial networks and sartorial representation. Ramaswamy provides the socio-economic and technological foundation; Sinopoli contributes the archaeological and organisational dimensions; art-historical studies reveal costume and visual culture; and recent textile scholarship, particularly the study of Lepakshi, demonstrates the interpretive potential of painted textile patterns. Yet these evidentiary domains have rarely been synthesised into a single material-cultural framework centred upon the archaeology of the woven.

The principal contribution of the present study therefore lies in bringing these fragmented archives into a sustained dialogue. Rather than treating textiles separately as commodities, costumes, craft products or artistic motifs, the study conceptualises them as simultaneously material, technological, social, economic, visual and political phenomena. Such an approach allows textile materiality to become a bridge between archaeology and art history, between craft technology and imperial aesthetics, and between artisan agency and structures of power.

The research consequently proposes a shift from the history of textiles to the archaeology of textile materiality. This shift is methodological as much as conceptual. It recognises that where the physical textile has disappeared, its traces persist in stone, pigment, inscription, language, literary memory and embodied craft traditions. The task is therefore not merely to recover lost fabrics but to reconstruct the cultural system that produced, valued, circulated and represented them.

In this interpretive framework, the Vijayanagara textile becomes a palimpsesto of technological knowledge and cultural encounter. Its fibre records ecological resources; its weave records technical intelligence; its pattern records aesthetic imagination; its circulation records commercial networks; its representation records social hierarchy; and its consumption records political aspiration. The textile consequently emerges as an eloquent material language through which the Vijayanagara Empire articulated prosperity, identity, distinction and sovereignty.

The literature reviewed above establishes a strong scholarly foundation, but it also demonstrates the necessity of an integrated approach. The present research responds to that necessity by combining archaeological reasoning, epigraphic analysis, iconographic interpretation, technological reconstruction and material-cultural theory. Through this synthesis, the study seeks to reposition textile not at the margins of Vijayanagara art history but at its conceptual centre, where materia, craft, commerce and imperial esthétique converge. The ultimate objective is to reveal the woven not as a silent remnant of a vanished material world, but as a dynamic archive of knowledge, labour, identity and cultural imagination.

4.CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

I. Material Constitution of Vijayanagara Textiles: Materialité, Technology and Aesthetic Significance

The material constitution of Vijayanagara textiles may be understood through the French concept of matérialité, which directs attention simultaneously towards the physical substance of cloth and the cultural meanings generated through its manipulation. Rather than perceiving textiles merely as utilitarian commodities, this approach considers fibre, yarn, dye, weave, texture and ornament as interconnected components of a sophisticated technological and aesthetic system.

Fibre constituted the primary material vocabulary. Cotton occupied an important position within the textile economy of peninsular South India, while silk acquired particular significance within elite, ceremonial and courtly

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

contexts. The distinction between ordinary cotton fabrics and luxurious silk textiles could itself articulate social hierarchy and differentiated patterns of consumption. The combination of cotton and silk, documented in the Vijayanagara textile context, further demonstrates technological experimentation and material adaptability.

The transformation of fibre into yarn represents an important stage of embodied technological knowledge. Spinning demanded tactile sensitivity, control of tension and consistency of thread. The subsequent processes of warping and weaving reveal the artisan's savoir-faire, where technical precision converged with aesthetic intention. The French concept of chaîneopératoire is particularly appropriate here, since each operation—from fibre preparation to finished cloth-formed part of a cumulative technological sequence.

Dyeing introduced chromatic identity into the woven surface. Natural colourants transformed otherwise neutral fibres into vibrant visual fields, while variations in colour intensity, juxtaposition and pattern contributed to the esthétique of the textile. Weave structures and texture similarly generated tactile distinctions, ranging from relatively plain surfaces to elaborate patterned and figured fabrics.

The murals of Lepakshi provide exceptional visual evidence. Stripes, checks, floral motifs and other patterned textiles represented upon garments reveal an intricate ornamental vocabulary, while sculptural representations at Hampi preserve evidence of drapery, folds, turbans and elaborate costume. These visual documents allow the material characteristics of otherwise vanished textiles to be approached through their artistic representation.

Ornament ultimately transformed textile into forma culturale. Pattern, colour, texture and embellishment communicated status, ritual identity and aesthetic refinement. Vijayanagara textiles therefore emerge as material artefacts in which technology became aesthetics, and craftsmanship became cultural expression. Their materialité resides precisely in this synthesis of substance, skill, sensory experience and symbolic meaning.

II. Reconstruction of the Chaîne Opératoire of Textile Production

Reconstructing the chaîneopératoire of Vijayanagara textile production entails tracing the sequential transformation of raw material into an aesthetically accomplished woven artefact. The concept enables textile to be understood not as a static commodity but as the cumulative outcome of innumerable technical gestures, sensory judgements and embodied skills. Within this continuum, the artisan's savoir-faire becomes an essential form of technological knowledge transmitted through apprenticeship, observation, repetition and tactile experience.

The process commenced with the preparation of fibres, particularly cotton and silk. Cleaning, separating, softening and aligning fibres required considerable manual dexterity. Spinning subsequently transformed these fibres into continuous yarn, where control over twist, thickness and tensile strength determined the eventual character of the fabric. The consistency of yarn was crucial to producing an even textile surface, while variations could intentionally generate distinctive textures.

Warping and weaving constituted the structural core of production. The arrangement of warp threads and the controlled insertion of the weft established the architecture of the cloth. Different combinations of threads could produce variations in density, surface quality and visual rhythm. The technological intelligence of the weaver therefore operated simultaneously through calculation, bodily coordination and sensory perception. The loom functioned as both technological apparatus and creative instrument.

Dyeing introduced chromatic identity into this material sequence. The preparation of natural colourants, immersion or application of dyes, control of saturation and subsequent drying required accumulated empirical knowledge. Colour was not merely decorative; it contributed to ritual associations, social distinction and sartorial aesthetics.

Pattern-making and ornamentation transformed structural cloth into an expressive surface. Stripes, checks, floral forms and geometric arrangements represented in the Lepakshi murals offer valuable visual evidence of the patterned textile repertoire associated with the Vijayanagara period. Such representations can be compared with surviving South Indian textile traditions to investigate continuity and technological transformation.

Finally, finishing—including washing, smoothing, strengthening, embellishing and preparing cloth for circulation or ceremonial use—completed the chaîneopératoire. Through these interconnected stages, Vijayanagara textile production emerges as an intricate processocreativo, where material intelligence, bodily memory and aesthetic imagination converged. The finished textile thus embodies not merely labour but a sophisticated technological savoir-faire, preserving within its woven structure the invisible choreography of generations of artisans.

III. Weaving Communities, Craft Specialists and Merchant Networks

The textile economy of the Vijayanagara Empire was sustained by an intricate constellation of weaving communities, specialised artisans, dyers, spinners, embroiderers, merchants and intermediaries, whose collective agency shaped the material and commercial landscape of the polity. Identifying these occupational groups enables textile history to move beyond the anonymous fabric and recover the human savoir-faire embedded within its production, circulation and consumption.

Historical scholarship, particularly the work of Vijaya Ramaswamy, demonstrates the significance of weaving communities in medieval South India and their relationship with markets, temples, merchant organisations and

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

political authorities. Communities associated with weaving, including Saliyar, Devanga and related occupational groups, should therefore be examined not merely as hereditary categories but as dynamic communities possessing specialised technological knowledge, institutional affiliations and distinctive occupational identities. Their skills constituted an embodied patrimoine transmitted through apprenticeship and collective memory.

The production process itself involved a wider constellation of craft specialists. Spinners transformed fibre into yarn; dyers imparted chromatic identity; weavers constructed the fabric; pattern specialists created ornamental surfaces; and finishing specialists prepared textiles for consumption. Such differentiation indicates an elaborate chaîneopératoire in which specialised labour converged towards a single material artefact. The artisan consequently emerges as a cultural agent whose technical intelligence contributed directly to Vijayanagara's visual and economic culture.

Merchant networks formed the connective tissue between production and consumption. Textile merchants facilitated the movement of fibres, yarns, dyes and finished fabrics between inland production centres, temple towns, royal establishments and coastal markets. Their activities connected the Vijayanagara interior with the broader commercial circuits of the Coromandel Coast and Indian Ocean world. Textiles thus became instruments of circolazioneculturale, carrying not only commodities but also motifs, technologies and aesthetic preferences across geographical boundaries.

Temple institutions and royal establishments constituted important arenas of textile consumption and patronage. Textiles could enter ritual economies through donations, ceremonial presentation and institutional requirements, while elite consumption transformed luxurious fabrics into visible signs of prestige. Inscriptions are particularly valuable for reconstructing such relationships because they preserve traces of occupational identities, donations, privileges and economic transactions.

Consequently, Vijayanagara's textile communities should be understood as active participants in the socio-économie of empire. Their agency resided not simply in producing cloth but in sustaining technological traditions, negotiating occupational identities, participating in commercial networks and contributing to the empire's evolving esthétique. The woven textile thereby becomes a collective achievementa material forma culturale in which artisan knowledge, merchant enterprise and political economy converged.

IV. Sculptures, Murals and Architectural Representations as a Visual Archive of Textiles

The visual culture of the Vijayanagara Empire constitutes an invaluable archive visuel through which the material world of textiles can be reconstructed despite the limited survival of archaeological fabrics. Sculptures, murals and architectural ornament preserve the fold, drapery, contour, pattern, colour and decorative vocabulary of garments, transforming stone and pigment into surrogate repositories of textile memory. Their interpretation through semiotica and sartorial aesthetics enables clothing to be understood not merely as bodily covering but as a sophisticated visual language of identity, hierarchy, rituality and political authority.

The sculptural programmes of Hampi, particularly those associated with the Virupaksha, Vittala and Hazara Rama temples, reveal considerable attention to costume and bodily presentation. Draped lower garments, pleated surfaces, waistbands, turbans, headgear and ornamental textiles are rendered through rhythmic incisions and carefully articulated contours. Although stone cannot reproduce the tactile softness of cloth, sculptors translate textile qualities into visual equivalents. The carved fold becomes a segno of fabric; the rhythmic repetition of pleats evokes movement; and the differentiation of garment forms communicates distinctions of occupation, gender and status. Thus, sculptural representation operates as a semioticatessile.

The Lepakshi murals offer an even more chromatically expressive archive. Their extensive figural compositions preserve representations of striped, checked, floral and patterned textiles. Garments worn by royal, elite, divine and attendant figures reveal variations in length, surface decoration and visual complexity. The celebrated donor figures Viranna and Virupanna provide particularly significant evidence, as their elaborate garments contrast with the shorter tunics represented on attendants. Such differentiation suggests that sartorial form functioned as a visual grammar of social distinction. The mural therefore transforms esthétiquevestimentaire into a painted taxonomy of status.

Architectural representations must likewise be interpreted contextually. Textile imagery occurs within sacred narratives, courtly scenes, processional representations and sculptural ensembles, indicating that clothing acquired meaning according to spatial and ritual circumstance. The textile is therefore inseparable from the mise-en-scène of the architectural environment.

Ornament, moreover, constitutes an important semiotic layer. Borders, floral motifs, geometric configurations and repeated patterns may have carried associations of prosperity, ritual auspiciousness, prestige and cultural affiliation. Their recurrence across sculptural and pictorial media allows comparative analysis of textile motifs and broader Vijayanagara decorative aesthetics.

Accordingly, sculptures and murals should not be regarded merely as illustrations of costume. They constitute material translations of vanished textiles. Through semiotica, iconografia and sartorial esthétique, the study

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

recovers an otherwise fugitive textile vocabulary, demonstrating how the Vijayanagara body became a moving canvas upon which materiality, identity, hierarchy and imperial magnificence were aesthetically inscribed.

V. Textiles as Instruments of Social Differentiation, Ritual Identity and Political Representation

Within the Vijayanagara Empire, textiles transcended their utilitarian function and became eloquent instruments of social differentiation, ritual identity and political representation. The textile surface operated as a subtle systèmesémiotique, through which rank, occupation, gender, ritual position and proximity to political authority could be visually articulated. Fibre, colour, weave, ornament, garment form and degree of embellishment collectively constituted a sartorial vocabulary through which society rendered its hierarchies visible.

Courtly consumption provides an especially significant context. Luxurious silk, finely woven fabrics, elaborate borders and ornamented garments would have distinguished royal and aristocratic bodies from those of ordinary subjects. Descriptions of Vijayanagara courtly splendour by travellers such as Abdur Razzaq, Domingo Paes and Fernão Nuniz reveal the extraordinary visual magnificence associated with elite dress, ceremonial presentation and royal consumption. Clothing consequently became an instrument of rappresentazionepolitica, transforming the sovereign body into a spectacle of abundance, refinement and authority.

The Lepakshi murals provide compelling visual evidence for this sartorial hierarchy. The elaborate garments associated with the donor figures Viranna and Virupanna, contrasted with the comparatively simpler and shorter garments of attendants, suggest differentiated codes of status. Here, clothing operates as semioticavestimentaria: garment length, surface treatment and ornament become visual signifiers of social position. The body itself becomes a mobile forma culturale, carrying hierarchy through the architectural and ceremonial space.

Textiles also possessed profound ritual significance. Within temple culture, cloth could function as an offering, ceremonial covering, sacred gift or marker of ritual participation. Its value derived not solely from material expense but from its capacity to mediate between the human, divine and institutional spheres. Fine textiles offered to deities transformed material wealth into religious merit, while ceremonial garments contributed to the visual splendour of sacred festivals and processions.

The political dimension is equally significant. The selective adoption of Persianate and Islamic sartorial forms demonstrates that Vijayanagara court culture participated in a wider circolazioneculturale. Garments such as tunics and distinctive headgear could be appropriated and re-signified within local structures of prestige and authority.

Thus, Vijayanagara textiles constituted a sophisticated linguaggiovisivo. Their social meaning emerged through the intersection of material luxury, bodily presentation, ritual efficacy and political spectacle. Textile consumption consequently became a form of social choreography, through which hierarchy was not merely possessed but performed, perceived and aesthetically naturalised.

VI. Circulation of Textiles, Technologies and Aesthetic Conventions across Regional and Maritime Networks

The circulation of textiles within the Vijayanagara world reveals a sophisticated circolazioneculturale in which materials, techniques, motifs and sartorial conventions traversed political frontiers, commercial corridors and maritime horizons. Vijayanagara functioned not merely as a territorial empire but as an expansive textile entrepôt, where inland production zones were articulated with the commercial ecologies of the Coromandel, Malabar and western Indian Ocean. Cotton from the Deccan, silk from southern weaving centres, dyed and patterned fabrics from the Coromandel, and imported luxury textiles entered an intricate economy of exchange, patronage and conspicuous consumption.

The movement of textiles also facilitated a transfertculturel of technologies. Techniques of resist-dyeing, mordant colouring, block printing, weaving and surface embellishment circulated through merchant communities and artisanal networks. The transmission of such savoir-faire was neither mechanically imitative nor culturally unilateral; rather, local artisans appropriated external techniques and reconfigured them through indigenous aesthetic grammars. The resultant textiles embodied a hybriditéesthétique, wherein regional idioms encountered Persianate, Southeast Asian and wider Indian Ocean visual vocabularies.

Vijayanagara's maritime connections intensified these exchanges. Ports associated with the western and eastern seaboards connected the empire with merchants operating towards Arabia, Persia, Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Textiles consequently became objets de circulation, functioning simultaneously as commodities, diplomatic gifts, ritual offerings and markers of status. Foreign travellers' descriptions of luxurious garments, bazaars and elite consumption illuminate the social theatre in which textiles acquired political visibility.

Sculptural and mural evidence further constitutes a visual archive of this circolazione. The elaborate draperies, patterned textiles, turbans, waist-cloths and ceremonial garments represented at Hampi, Lepakshi and other Vijayanagara monuments suggest a richly differentiated sartorial repertoire. Their visual syntax demonstrates how textile aesthetics participated in the construction of identitésociale, sacred presence and royal magnificence.

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

Thus, textile circulation should be interpreted as a mobile aesthetic system rather than merely an economic phenomenon. Through merchants, artisans, pilgrims, courts and maritime intermediaries, Vijayanagara became a crucial carrefour culturel, where fibres, colours, technologies, motifs and embodied practices converged to generate an evolving textile cosmopolitanism.

VII. Synthesising Epigraphic, Archaeological, Literary and Visual Evidence: Recovering the Cultural Biography of Textiles

The cultural biography of textiles in the Vijayanagara period can be reconstructed only through an interdisciplinary synthèse of epigraphic, archaeological, literary and visual evidence. Since organic textiles rarely survive in the archaeological record, their historical presence must often be recovered through traces, representations, terminology and institutional records. Such an approach transforms the textile from a perishable commodity into an agent of material culture, possessing a biographieculturelle shaped by production, circulation, patronage, ritual use and symbolic transformation.

Epigraphic evidence constitutes an indispensable documentary archive. Temple inscriptions referring to donations of cloth, garments, silk, cotton, ceremonial vestments and textile-related endowments illuminate the economic and ritual functions of fabrics. Records associated with Vijayanagara temples can reveal the relationship between textile offerings and seva, festival economies and royal patronage. Such inscriptions also provide evidence concerning merchants, weaving communities, occupational groups and institutional networks, enabling the reconstruction of the textile's provenance and social trajectory.

Archaeological evidence complements these textual records through material residues such as spindle whorls, loom-related implements, dyeing installations, beads, textile-impression fragments and associated production debris. Even when the textile itself has disappeared, its technological savoir-faire may remain materially legible. Such evidence permits an investigation of fibre preparation, spinning, weaving and finishing processes, thereby recovering the gestesartisanaux embedded within textile production.

Literary sources add an important phenomenological dimension. Court chronicles, travellers' accounts, devotional literature and regional texts describe sumptuous garments, turbans, veils, silk fabrics and ceremonial costumes. These narratives illuminate textiles as instruments of prestige, sensuality, devotion and political theatre. Descriptions of royal processions and temple festivals reveal how cloth participated in the choreography of sovereignty and sacred spectacle.

The visual archiveparticularly the sculptures and murals of Hampi, Lepakshi and other Vijayanagara monumentsprovides an extraordinary repertorioiconografico. Draperies, pleats, patterned surfaces, elaborate borders and differentiated costumes reveal sartorial hierarchies and aesthetic conventions. Lepakshi murals, for instance, visually articulate the chromatic richness and ornamental vocabulary associated with elite and sacred environments.

Consequently, textile history emerges as a storiamateriale in which cloth moves from fibre to fabric, from workshop to marketplace, from marketplace to temple and from ritual object to visual memory. Its circolazione registers economic exchange, social distinction, sacred efficacy and political representation. The synthesis of these heterogeneous archives therefore recovers textiles not as passive commodities but as dynamic carriers of memory, identity, craftsmanship and cultural meaning within Vijayanagara material culture.

VIII. Textiles as Carriers of Memory, Identity, Craftsmanship and Imperial Magnificence

Textiles within the Vijayanagara cultural sphere must be interpreted not merely as commodities of exchange, but as dynamic repositories of memory, identity, artisanal knowledge and imperial magnificence. Their historical significance resides in the convergence of materiality and meaning, where fibre, colour, texture, pattern and ornament became vehicles of mémoireculturelle. A textile could traverse multiple social and spatial domainsfrom the artisan's workshop to the merchant's bazar, from the royal court to the temple precinctaccumulating meanings through successive acts of production, circulation, gifting and ritual use.

The memory-bearing capacity of textiles is particularly significant. Garments offered to deities, ceremonial cloths associated with festivals and fabrics presented as royal gifts could acquire an enduring mémoirerituelle. Their value therefore exceeded their material composition. Through repeated ritual enactment, textiles became repositories of collective remembrance, connecting contemporary communities with dynastic traditions and sacred narratives. In this sense, cloth operated as a form of patrimoineimmatériel, preserving cultural knowledge through embodied practice.

Textiles simultaneously articulated social and cultural identity. Variations in weave, colour, ornamentation, drapery and sartorial arrangement could signify gender, occupation, ritual status, regional affiliation and social distinction. Sculptural representations at Hampi and Lepakshi reveal differentiated costumes and elaborate textile surfaces, suggesting a sophisticated grammairevestimentaire. Clothing thus became a visual language through which individuals and communities negotiated identitésociale and ceremonial presence.

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

Equally important was the craftsmanship embedded within textile production. Spinning, dyeing, weaving, embroidery, printing and finishing represented accumulated savoir-faire, transmitted through generations of artisan communities. Each textile consequently embodied an opera d'arte of technical precision, tactile intelligence and aesthetic judgement. Its surface became an archive of embodied knowledge.

At the level of political representation, textiles participated in constructing imperial magnificence. Luxurious fabrics, ceremonial garments, sumptuous canopies and richly ornamented textiles contributed to the teatro del potere, transforming royal ceremonies and temple festivals into spectacular performances of sovereignty. Textile splendour thus translated political authority into sensory experience.

Consequently, Vijayanagara textiles should be approached as mobile cultural artefacts whose meanings evolved through circolazione, ritualisation and visual representation. Such an interpretive framework expands South Indian textile archaeology from the recovery of material remains towards a more nuanced storiaculturale, in which cloth becomes a mediator between memory, identity, technology, aesthetics and power.

5.FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

The research establishes that textiles in the Vijayanagara milieu constituted far more than utilitarian commodities; they operated as mobile repositories of memory, identity, technology, aesthetics and power. The triangulation of epigraphic, archaeological, literary and visual evidence reveals an intricate circolazioneculturale through which fibres, weaving technologies, chromatic practices, motifs and sartorial conventions traversed regional and maritime networks. Vijayanagara consequently emerges as a significant carrefour culturel, where indigenous savoir-faire encountered external influences and generated distinctive forms of textile hybridity.

The study further demonstrates that textiles occupied a crucial position within ritual economies and systems of social differentiation. Temple donations, ceremonial garments and elite fabrics transformed cloth into instruments of devotion, prestige and political representation. Sculptural and mural evidence from Hampi and Lepakshi reveals an elaborate grammairevestimentaire, articulating distinctions of rank, gender, occupation and sacred status through drapery, ornament and patterned surfaces.

Moreover, artisanal communities emerge as custodians of embodied knowledge, transmitting technical expertise through generations. Textiles therefore possess a profound biographieculturelle: moving from workshop to marketplace, court and temple, they accumulated meanings through circulation and ritualisation. The findings ultimately expand South Indian textile archaeology into a richer storiamateriale, where cloth becomes an eloquent mediator between craftsmanship, cultural memory, aesthetics and imperial magnificence.

Scope of the Research

This research encompasses the material, technological, aesthetic, socio-cultural and maritime dimensions of textiles within the Vijayanagara cultural milieu, situating cloth within a wider circolazioneculturale across South India and the Indian Ocean. It interrogates fibres, weaving technologies, dyeing practices, motifs, sartorial conventions and systems of patronage through epigraphic, archaeological, literary and visual archives. Particular attention is accorded to Hampi, Lepakshi and allied centres, examining textiles as objetsculturels that mediated ritual identity, social distinction, mercantile exchange and imperial spectacle. The study further reconstructs artisanal savoir-faire and the transmission of aesthetic conventions across regional networks. By integrating storiamateriale, iconographic interpretation and cultural semiotics, the research expands textile archaeology beyond surviving fragments towards the cultural biography, symbolic agency and aesthetic mémoire of textiles.

6.LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The study is constrained by the ephemeral materiality of textiles, whose organic fibres rarely survive within archaeological contexts, thereby producing inevitable lacunae in the material archive. Fragmentary epigraphic records and variable terminology may complicate the precise identification of fabrics, techniques and occupational communities. Literary accounts occasionally privilege courtly splendour, creating a perspectival asymmetry in representing artisanal and subaltern experiences. Visual sources, though aesthetically eloquent, require cautious iconographic interpretation, since artistic conventions may not correspond literally to historical sartorial realities. Geographical dispersal of evidence further restricts comprehensive comparative analysis. Consequently, the research acknowledges these lacunes while employing interdisciplinary triangulation to construct a critically nuanced material and cultural narrative.

7.CONCLUSION

This research concludes that textiles constituted an epistemic, aesthetic and cultural infrastructure of Vijayanagara society, transcending their conventional categorisation as commodities. Through the interweaving of circolazioneculturale, artisanal savoir-faire and ritual practice, textiles connected workshops, marketplaces, temples, courts and maritime networks within an expansive material ecology. Epigraphic, archaeological, literary and visual evidence collectively reveals cloth as a bearer of mémoireculturelle, social identity and political

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM

symbolism. Its colours, textures, motifs and sartorial configurations articulated a sophisticated grammaireesthétique, while ceremonial fabrics participated in the teatro del potere and sacred spectacle. The study consequently repositions textile archaeology within a broader storiamateriale, where the ephemeral becomes historically eloquent. Vijayanagara textiles emerge as objetsculturels possessing technological intelligence, sensory resonance and symbolic agency, thereby illuminating the intricate relationship between craftsmanship, commerce, devotion, identity and imperial magnificence in South Indian cultural history

REFERENCES

1. Allchin, F. R. (Ed.). (1984). Archaeological research in India. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
2. Dallapiccola, A. L., & Zingel-Ave Lallemant, S. (Eds.). (1985). Vijayanagara: City and empire: New currents of research. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, Stuttgart.
3. Dehejia, V. (1997). Indian art. Phaidon Press, London.
4. Eaton, R. M. (2005). A social history of the Deccan, 1300–1761: Eight Indian lives. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
5. Fritz, J. M. (1986). Vijayanagara: Authority and meaning of a South Indian imperial capital. American Anthropologist, 88(1), 44–55.
6. Fritz, J. M., & Michell, G. (1991). City of victory: Vijayanagara, the medieval Hindu capital of southern India. Aperture, New York.
7. Fritz, J. M., & Michell, G. (2001). New light on Hampi: Recent research at Vijayanagara. Marg Publications, Mumbai.
8. Fritz, J. M., & Michell, G. (2003). Hampi. India Book House, Mumbai.
9. Fritz, J. M., & Michell, G. (2014). Hampi Vijayanagara. Jaico Publishing House, London.
10. Fritz, J. M., Michell, G., & Nagaraja Rao, M. S. (1984). Where kings and gods meet: The royal centre at Vijayanagara, India. University of Arizona Press, Tucson.
11. Karashima, N. (Ed.). (1992). South Indian history and society: Studies from inscriptions, A.D. 850–1800. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
12. Karashima, N. (2001). A concordance of historical and statistical sources of South India. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
13. Michell, G. (Ed.). (1992). Architecture and art of southern India: Vijayanagara and the successor states, 1350–1750. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
14. Michell, G., &Filliozat, V. (Eds.). (1981). Splendours of the Vijayanagara Empire: Hampi. Marg Publications, Bombay.
15. Michell, G., Poduval, J., & Wagoner, P. B. (2001). Vijayanagara: Architectural inventory of the sacred centre. Manohar, New Delhi.
16. Michell, G., & Wagoner, P. B. (Eds.). (2001). Vijayanagara: Architectural inventory of the sacred centre. Manohar, New Delhi.
17. Nagaraja Rao, M. S. (Ed.). (1983). Vijayanagara: Progress of research, 1979–1983. Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Mysore.
18. Narayana Rao, V., Shulman, D., & Subrahmanyam, S. (1992). Symbols of substance: Court and state in Nayaka period Tamil Nadu. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
19. Ramaswamy, V. (1985). Textiles and weavers in medieval South India. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
20. Ramamurthy, K. (Ed.). (1996). Vijayanagara heritage: Collection of articles presented at Hampi–Vijayanagara History Seminar. Sri Vidyaranya Hampi Heritage Trust, Anegundi–Hospet.
21. Sewell, R. (1900). A forgotten empire: Vijayanagar; A contribution to the history of India. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., London.
22. Sinopoli, C. M. (2003). The political economy of craft production: Crafting empire in South India, c. 1350–1650. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
23. Subrahmanyam, S. (1990). The political economy of commerce: Southern India, 1500–1650. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
24. Talbot, C. (2001). Precolonial India in practice: Society, region, and identity in medieval Andhra. Oxford University Press, New York.
25. Wagoner, P. B. (1996). Sultan among Hindu kings: Dress, titles and the Islamicization of Hindu culture at Vijayanagara. Journal of Asian Studies, 55(4), 851–880.

OPEN ACCESS © CINEFORUM