

## Sanskritizing the Persian Cosmopolis: A Case Study from the Monetary History of the Deccan

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This paper examines the interaction between Persianate and Sanskritic political culture in the Deccan region of peninsular India, focusing on the period from approximately 1300 to 1650. This period saw the rise of two major political formations in the region: the Persianate Bahmani sultanate (and after 1500, its successor states), holding sway over the lands north of the Krishna and Tungabhadra rivers, and the Sanskritic kingdom of Vijayanagara, the paramount power in the southern Deccan and most of the Tamil country still further south. These two polities vied with each other for domination of the entire region, a competition that has often been misunderstood in our day as expressing a fundamental opposition and incompatibility between Islam and Hinduism, the respective religions of their ruling classes. My colleague Richard M. Eaton and I have recently proposed a different paradigm to make sense of this competition, one that sees the Bahmani and Vijayanagara states not through the communal lens of two essentialized and mutually hostile religious systems, but rather, in terms of the complex interaction between two parallel cultures of rulership that were grounded in different prestige languages—a “Sanskrit cosmopolis” and a “Persian cosmopolis.” In the Deccan, these two cultural formations first began a sustained mutual encounter toward the middle of the fourteenth century, as the Bahmani and Vijayanagara states came into conflict with each other, but the nature of their interaction was varied, oscillating between moments of conflict and periods of openness and receptive exchange.

What is most striking about this shifting relationship is the way the two cosmopolises gradually converged over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, until by the middle of the seventeenth century they were so tightly interwoven that the notion of two distinct types of polity ceases to hold much explanatory power. On the one hand, many of the established Indic ideas and practices of the Vijayanagara elite began to yield to newer ones appropriated from the Persianate realm of the neighboring Bahmani kingdom—as, for example, in architecture, court dress, and administrative methods, as Vijayanagara’s rulers began styling themselves as “sultans among Hindu kings.” On the other hand, many of the ideas and practices of the Bahmani sultanate and its successor states yielded to Sanskritic analogues, enabling the Persian cosmopolis to become more deeply rooted in the region. Thus, Persian farmans and inscriptions gradually became bilingual, brahmins were given positions of influence in the state administration, and key concepts of kingship within the Sanskritic system—such as the doctrine of the chakravartin and his rule over Jambudvipa, the central continent of Indian cosmography—received approving expression in Persian and Dakhani texts of the period.

Much of this convergent development resulted from social interaction at the elite level, as members of the military-political classes migrated back and forth between the courts of the Bahmani successor states and Vijayanagara, seeking the best opportunities for military service. What has been less fully explored is the contribution of non-elites to the process, and this paper aims to rectify that situation by examining the use of



Figure Selected Coin Types Circulating in the Northern Deccan, c. 1520. Center: Vijayanagara Gold Hons; Outer Circle: Bahmani Silver Tankas and Copper Ganis (Private Collection).

money among a range of non-elite groups, from agriculturalists and merchants to bankers and moneylenders. Monetary usage is clearly a major part of political culture, but it also possesses a more purely economic component that often pits the interests of society against those of the state. Accordingly, it is imperative to study the coinage of a given state not simply as a political artifact designed to communicate the state's self-understanding, but also as a circulating medium that changed hands and facilitated economic transactions, even in ways that went beyond the intentions and expectations of the issuing authorities.

The founding of the Vijayanagara and Bahmani states in the mid-14th century witnessed the concomitant establishment of two distinct currency systems in the Deccan: the one, Vijayanagara's adaptation of an established Indic system dating back to the late tenth century in the Deccan; the other, the Bahmanis' adaptation of the Persianate system of north India used by the Delhi Sultanate. Each of these two currencies had its own norms for coinage metals, metrology, and purity. Each also had a set formal typology, with Vijayanagara issues featuring images of Hindu deities on the obverse and the king's titles in Sanskrit on the reverse, while Bahmani issues were aniconic and featured the names and titles of the issuing sultan, written calligraphically in Persian on both obverse and reverse. Considered in the abstract, as numismatic devices designed to convey messages of authority and legitimacy, the two coinage systems appear to be natural expressions of the Sanskrit and Persian cosmopolises represented by the Vijayanagara and Bahmani states.

Analysis of the respective circulation patterns of the two coinages complicates matters, and demonstrates that currency spheres are not necessarily congruent with the political boundaries of the states that issue the currency. From my analysis of over 300 reported coin hoards, it is clear that the Persianate currency of the Bahmanis and their successors was restricted in circulation to an area closely approximating the territorial extent of the Bahmani state, while in contrast, the Sanskrit coinage of Vijayanagara enjoyed circulation throughout the entirety of the Deccan region, including the Bahmani territory all the way up through Maharashtra. This was evidently due to a high demand—especially in rural, agricultural contexts—for the relatively small gold coins of Vijayanagara known as *varaha* or *hon* (minted at 3.672gm) and their fractional denominations, since gold coins of similar weight, purity, and fabric had customarily been used to pay agricultural taxes throughout the Deccan since the late tenth century. The Vijayanagara gold *hon* circulated in such great numbers in the Bahmani territory—outnumbering the locally produced Bahmani gold coins, as we shall see, by a factor of 9 to 1—that it became a crucial part of the Bahmani economy. Indeed, by the opening years of the sixteenth century, epigraphic evidence shows that agricultural and commercial taxes within the Bahmani territory were being assessed and collected in Vijayanagara-issued *hons*. And when Vijayanagara finally fell at the hands of a coalition of Bahmani successor states in 1565, these successor states began minting their own *hons* to augment the rapidly diminishing money supply.

This case of complementarity between the two coinages shows vividly how everyday economic activity, manifest in the actions taken by individuals from a wide range of non-elite groups, contributed to the convergence between Sanskrit and Persianate cultures of statecraft in the Deccan. Agriculturalists and other rural classes—who after all constituted the majority of the Bahmani population—preferred the coins of a weight, purity, and appearance that had been locally in use for centuries, instead of the unfamiliar and inconveniently sized coins issued by their rulers. Bankers and moneylenders (*shroffs*) satisfied this demand by withdrawing Bahmani gold coins and taking them to Vijayanagara mints, where they were melted down and restruck to the Vijayanagara standard before being returned to circulation. The ruling elite, from the time of Muhammad Shah Bahmani to Muhammad 'Adil Shah, attempted to stop this subterfuge, but the economic forces were too strong and the result was this vivid example of Sanskritization of the Persianate currency system.

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## "Comment" Islamicate Transculturation and Local Societies:

### Comparative Perspectives on 13th–16th Century South Asia and Southeast Asia

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There was a rise of a Islamicate world system, that is, a shared arena of institutions, technologies and values, covering parts of the Subcontinent and Malacca straits by the 13th century. The Islamicate world system provided law, customs, vocabularies, technologies of accounting and writing, and so on, which facilitated trade, communication and legitimation of power across diverse societies. However, there were differences in the ways various societies accepted and in turn influenced the Islamicate world system. In other words, Islamicate world system and local social systems

