

TEMPLE DESECRATION IN THE
SIXTEENTH-CENTURY DECCAN?
The case of the Adoni fort mosque

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ABSTRACT. This article reconstructs the complex history of a contested religious building inside the fort at Adoni, in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. When I surveyed it in June 2006, it had been partly demolished, the result of a day of communal rioting between Hindus and Muslims in October 1977. The building had been targeted by a group of Hindu youths based on their mistaken belief that the edifice had originally been a Hindu temple that had subsequently been converted into a mosque. The youths believed they were retaliating for the earlier desecration of their supposed temple, but its formal and structural features show that the building could never have functioned as such and must always have been a mosque. In fact it had been built as a mosque under the patronage of the Vijayanagara kings, Hindu rulers who had it constructed in the Vijayanagara style for the Muslim warriors in their service. When Vijayanagara lost control of Adoni, and it was taken over by the rulers of Bijapur, they transformed the mosque by plastering over Vijayanagara stylistic elements and reconstructing it in the Bijapuri metropolitan style. What the youths viewed in 1977 as the religious conversion of a temple into a mosque was in actuality the stylistic conversion of a Vijayanagara mosque into a Bijapuri one.

On 21 October 1977, the town of Adoni in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh was racked by communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. At one point during the day-long incident, in which eleven people were reported injured, a small mosque located in Adoni's medieval fort was damaged by a group of Hindu youths (Fig. 1). The two minarets rising above the mosque's façade were pulled down and smashed, and several tombs in the courtyard of the mosque were desecrated.¹ Evidence of the destruction still lies strewn about on the ground, serving as silent testimony to the violence

¹ Interview with Adoni resident Syed Ali Pasha (July 2006). The incident is also listed in the Varshney and Wilkinson 1950–95 database of Hindu-Muslim riots as reported in the Times of India. See Appendix 1 of Wilkinson (2005:406). Adoni also figures as a site in Sita Ram Goel's state-by-state, district-by-district, site-by-site list of mosques and other Islamic religious structures standing on the sites of former Hindu temples. See Goel (1990:75).



Fig. 1: Adoni, mosque in fort, c. 1550 (Vijayanagara phase) and 1568 (Bijapur phase)
(all illustrations except 8 below: P.B.W.)

of that day. The following October, two further days of communal violence resulted in the deaths of two people.

This article addresses the question of how buildings like Adoni's mosque come to be the object of such anger and violence. For Hindus attacking mosques, this vandalism is usually spurred by the belief that a given mosque occupies the site of an older temple, and it is desecrated as a means of exacting revenge. Those who identify these monumental targets rarely investigate their identities at all carefully, assuming that the presence of certain characteristic formal features associated with Muslim or Hindu architecture is sufficient to confirm the identification. Yet, the Adoni mosque shows that these presumptive Muslim and Hindu markers can be charged with meanings that are more political than religious. It will be argued here that the complex fabric of this unassuming building offers a record of the military struggle for control of this fort between the two principal powers in the region known as the Deccan, an area the size of France and the UK combined, occupying the upland plateau of the Indian peninsula.

Adoni is located some ninety kilometres northeast of Vijayanagara, the capital of the Deccan's southernmost state, which at its apogee in the sixteenth century controlled most of the peninsula south of the Tungabhadra and Krishna rivers. Adoni was reputed to have been one of the strongest fortifications in the Deccan. Firishta, an early seventeenth-century historian of the neighbouring state of Bijapur, observed that 'the kings of Vijayanagara, regarding it as impregnable, had all contributed to making it a convenient asylum for their families' (1966:81–82). Throughout the first half of the sixteenth century, Adoni remained firmly in Vijayanagara's control, although the ruler of Bijapur attempted an unsuccessful siege of the fort in 1535. But the tide changed thirty years later, in 1565, when a coalition of the forces of Bijapur and two other northern Deccan states defeated Vijayanagara's army on the battlefield, beheaded its commander, and marched on to pillage and burn the capital itself. This forced the remnants of the ruling house to retreat further south, shifting their capital to a new and more secure location. Immediately afterwards, Bijapur's ruler, Sultan 'Ali 'Adil Shah I, embarked on a campaign to annex as many of Vijayanagara's forts as he could. Accordingly, he marched on Adoni in 1568 with his general Ankush Khan. Adoni's commander prepared to weather a long siege, but after several months of being surrounded by the Bijapuri army, the fort was starved into submission. From this point, Adoni remained under firm Bijapuri control until 1686, when the state was annexed by the north Indian empire of the Mughals (Eaton and Wagoner 2014:139, 289–291).

It is against this historical background that the mosque in Adoni fort must be considered. Viewing the building's façade (Fig. 1), many typical Bijapuri stylistic features suggest that it had been constructed by 'Ali 'Adil Shah, or perhaps by Ankush Khan, in commemoration of Bijapur's capture of the long-coveted fort. The building lacks a foundation inscription to confirm this inference, but stylistic evidence does suggest a date that would be consistent with such an interpretation. If one compares the building's façade with that of another Bijapuri mosque, that in the fort at Naldrug, known to have been founded in the reign of 'Ali 'Adil Shah in 1560 (Fig. 2), one notices the same three-bay articulation, the same nesting of the arches in two planes, and a similar decorative vocabulary of cusped arches, projecting eaves carried on elaborate brackets, and carved stucco rosettes in the spandrels of the arches.²

² For the date of the Naldrug fort mosque, see Merklinger (1981:120), monument number 100.



Fig. 2: Naldrug, mosque in fort, 1560

The mosque's interior, however, is a very different kind of space, utterly unlike that of Naldrug, or indeed of any other typical Bijapuri mosques (Fig. 3). In the first place, the piers and arches of the façade have yielded to elaborately moulded columns and beams carrying a flat ceiling. The forms of the columns identify them as belonging to the tradition of Hindu temple architecture, as does the distinctive treatment of the ceiling over the central bay, with its 'rotated squares' (Fig. 4). This is the typical means of accentuating an important bay in Hindu temple architecture, which generally speaking did not employ domes or other forms of vaulting that were so ubiquitous in Indo-Islamic architecture.

Outside the building, and toward the rear, anomalies become more apparent (Fig. 5). The plain masonry walls are not unusual for a smaller mosque of this size, but the large terraced platform on which the structure stands, and especially the particular sequence of mouldings carved along its upper edge, would more typically be found in a temple. This temple-like quality is even more apparent in the mouldings of the plinth at the base of the wall, which are exactly as one would find them in an early sixteenth-cen-



Fig. 3: Adoni, mosque in fort, interior, view toward west

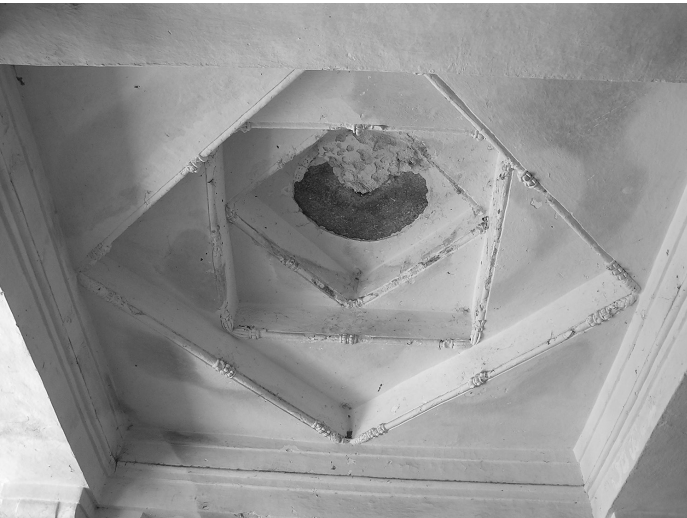


Fig. 4: Adoni, mosque in fort, ceiling over central bay

tury Vijayanagara-style temple. And finally, one cannot help but notice the sharp disjunction between the fabric of the platform and that of the arched addition for the façade and the courtyard of the mosque (Fig. 6), which has clearly been added subsequently to the core of the structure. Taken together, these various anomalies might well suggest that this ‘mosque’ constitutes not a new, purpose-built place of worship erected by ‘Ali ‘Adil Shah, but rather a pre-existing Hindu temple which has been converted by ‘Ali into a mosque. ‘Ali is in fact known to have patronized at least one temple-to-mosque con-



Fig. 5: Adoni,
mosque in fort,
view from south-
west



Fig. 6: Adoni,
mosque in fort,
view from south

version elsewhere, and such a scenario would also seem reasonable, given the wider historical context of Adoni as a site contested between Vijayanagara and Bijapur.³ As Hindus, Vijayanagara's rulers might naturally be expected to have constructed a temple when the fort was under their control, and Bijapur's Muslim rulers might reasonably be expected to have marked their victory by transforming the Hindu temple into a mosque. Moreover, in doing

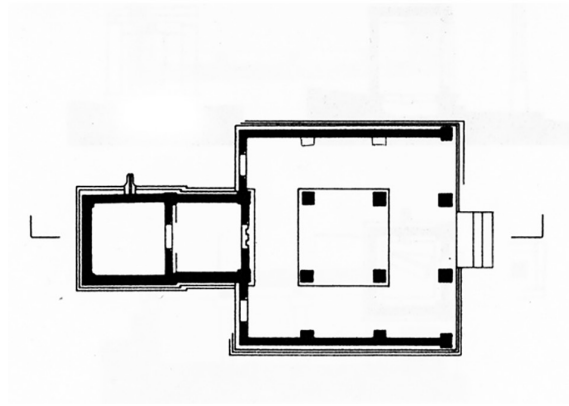
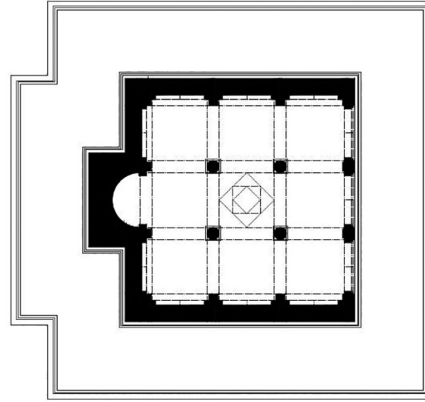
³ This was the Aravattukhambada Temple at Bankapur, which was converted into a mosque. See discussion below.

so they would naturally have employed the 'Islamic-style' piers and arches of the façade to mask the 'Hindu' style of the original temple's post and beam construction. The resulting formal opposition would have functioned not only as a means of announcing the victory of Muslim Bijapur over Hindu Vijayanagara at this site, it would also have served as a visual proclamation of the building's typological conversion from temple to mosque.

Reasonable though this scenario might appear, there is nonetheless an awkward detail that constitutes a critical obstacle to the hypothesis, and in particular to the assumption, that the building had originally been constructed as a temple. This is the rectangular plan of the small chamber projecting from the middle of the building's western wall (Fig. 7, above). Today, this serves as the outer wall of the mosque's *mibrab*, the Arabic word for the recessed niche in the middle of a mosque's main wall that marks the direction of Mecca. If the mosque had originally been a temple, then this chamber would presumably have served as its sanctum, where the image of the deity would have been enshrined. Indeed, temple sancta are generally smaller chambers projecting out from the west side of a larger pillared hall. But there are two problems with interpreting the chamber in this way. First, whereas the exteriors of temple sancta are inevitably square in plan, this projection is wider than it is deep, by a ratio of four to three. Second, in any Vijayanagara temple significant enough to be preceded by a nine-bay pillared hall like that found in the Adoni mosque, the sanctum is invariably preceded by a vestibule in the form of another square chamber that links the hall with the sanctum (Fig. 7, below). There is no vestibule in this building, nor is there any physical evidence to suggest that there ever was one. Had this building indeed begun its life as a temple, it would have been one of the most anomalous Vijayanagara temples on record.

There is, however, another and far more plausible interpretation of the building's earlier history. This is that the building was originally built not as a temple, but as a mosque, in the Vijayanagara style, and by a Vijayanagara patron. In this case, the rectangular projection on the west wall would have functioned not as a sanctum, but as a *mibrab*, just as it does in its present form. There is nothing inherently improbable in such a scenario, despite the widespread tendency to associate the Vijayanagara style with temples and with the Hindu religion. There are in fact other examples of Vijayanagara-style mosques, including some in the capital itself, which were intended for use by the Muslim Turks who served in the Vijayanagara army or were engaged in commerce in the capital. The most famous of these

Fig. 7: Plan of Adoni fort mosque (above). Vijayanagara, plan of temple with nine-bay hall (below), Vijayanagara Map Series NGk/2 (Michell and Wagoner 2001)



is the fifteenth-century mosque founded in Vijayanagara's Muslim quarter by the military commander Ahmad Khan, who, in his foundation inscription, referred to the building as a 'hall of religion' (Sanskrit, *dharmasala*) and dedicated the religious merit produced by its foundation to the reigning Vijayanagara king, Devaraya II (Wagoner 2003). Ahmad Khan's mosque is larger than its counterpart at Adoni, consisting of fifteen bays, five across and three deep. It also has a smaller *mihrab* niche that remains embedded within the thickness of the back wall, without being expressed as a projection on the outside. But otherwise, it is much like the original Vijayanagara core of the Adoni mosque, with which it shares the same structural vocabulary of posts and beams, the same flat ceilings, and a similar language of form in its articulation of columns and basement mouldings. Although there are in fact some significant formal differences between the two buildings, these simply

reflect the changes that the Vijayanagara style had undergone in the century or more that separates them.

If one accepts the proposition that the Adoni mosque was never a temple, but had originally been built as a mosque, then it is still necessary to address another problem, namely that posed by its four central columns. In size, material and style, these four columns appear quite different from the remaining columns in the structure (Fig. 3). These other columns, running around the perimeter of the hall, extend the full distance from floor to ceiling. In contrast, the central ones are so much shorter that each had to be shimmed with an additional stone block inserted between its base and the bottom of the shaft, simply so the shaft and its capital could reach all the way up to the beams in the ceiling. Then too, the peripheral columns are made from the local grey granite, as are all the other components in the original structure, while the central columns are made from an imported blue-green schist, for which the nearest quarries are located some 150 kilometres west of Adoni. Finally, although the peripheral columns exhibit the typical Vijayanagara style of around the 1550s, the style of the central columns is unmistakably different and may be recognized as that of the Kalyana Chalukya, a much earlier imperial state which had ruled over the Deccan some five hundred years earlier. The presence of these antique columns within a Vijayanagara structure, and in particular the manner of their display, bespeaks a deliberate antiquarianism on the part of the mosque's original builders, and calls to mind the better-known practice of reusing classical components in the buildings of medieval and Renaissance Europe.

As it happens, there are a number of intriguing precedents for the reuse of antique Chalukya columns in sixteenth-century Vijayanagara structures, and these help clarify the intentions behind such reuse (Wagoner 2007). Often, as in the example seen here from the Virupaksha temple in the capital (Fig. 8), these antique elements are deliberately juxtaposed with newly made components so as to accentuate their unusual forms. In this case, the Chalukya shafts of blue-green schist have been bracketed between bases and dish-capitals manufactured from the typical Vijayanagara grey granite, visually setting them off as if they were prized gems carefully fitted into a setting for display. And this reuse of Chalukya materials is not limited to columns, nor does it occur only in temples. For instance, there are several important instances of Chalukya temple doorframes being recycled in sixteenth-century buildings. In the most striking and extreme case of Chalukya reuse that has been documented, an entire step-well was dismantled at its original site,



Fig. 8: Vijayanagara, Virupaksha temple, pillared hall (Sanskrit *mandapa*) with reused Chalukya columns

its stones were transported to the capital, and the well was painstakingly re-assembled in the most public zone of the Vijayanagara palace complex (Wagoner 2011).

One may reasonably wonder why Vijayanagara patrons would have gone to such lengths to acquire and display relics of the Chalukya past. To understand this interest, one must consider the specific political context of this display. By the middle of the sixteenth century, Vijayanagara's ruling Tuluva dynasty was weakening, and a new power was emerging in the person of Rama Raya of the Aravidu family (Eaton 2005:78–104). In the 1540s, Rama Raya served as regent for Vijayanagara's young Tuluva king, Sadasivaraya, but by about 1550, when Sadasivaraya was ready to assume the burden of the throne, Rama Raya had him imprisoned and became *de facto* ruler of the kingdom instead, although ostensibly still ruling in Sadasivaraya's name. Although Rama Raya and his Aravidu kinsmen had enormous political and military power, they were in fact recent upstarts and usurpers who might easily be seen as lacking in legitimate authority. It was within this context that they began to show an interest in associating themselves with the Chalukya past – understandably, since the Chalukyas were remembered in the

sixteenth century as the last great dynasty to have ruled the entirety of the Deccan. The Aravidu princes expressed their obsession with the Chalukyas in several different ways, from vying with their Bijapuri neighbours for control of the old Chalukya capital at Kalyana to assuming Chalukya titles such as ‘born in the Chalukya lineage’ and even ‘Chalukya emperor’. Ultimately, the Aravidus went so far as to fabricate a genealogy that traced their lineage back to supposed Chalukya ancestors some five centuries earlier. Moreover, while touting this genealogy in their public edicts and inscriptions, they also began to collect antique Chalukya building components and deploy them prominently in their own buildings.

At this point one can reconsider the alterations made to the Adoni mosque after Bijapur’s conquest of the fort in 1568. If the building had already been a mosque from the time of its foundation, then one may reasonably ask why the occupying Bijapuri patrons would have needed to make any interventions at all. Clearly, what they were doing was not converting one functional type of building into another. Rather, it was stamping an existing building with their own metropolitan architectural style so as to proclaim the change in the building’s political affiliation that had followed from their occupation of the fort, even as the building’s function remained the same. Bijapur’s intervention in effect redefined the mosque as a ‘victory monument’ (Greek *tropaion*), effecting a ‘symbolic appropriation of the land’ in Oleg Grabar’s memorable phrase (1987). As Grabar observed, ‘the rule of a land or an area by a [new polity] [...] is often expressed through some visually perceptible form.’⁴ Following Grabar, one may conclude that Bijapur’s redefinition of Adoni’s mosque had very little to do with religion or ritual and everything to do with the visual projection of power.

There were two principal components to Bijapur’s stylistic redefinition of the mosque. In the first place, ‘Ali’s builders aimed to obscure the Vijayanagara fabric of the mosque’s interior, thus erasing a conspicuous trace of the fort’s earlier political affiliation (Fig. 9). This was accomplished by plastering over the columns around the perimeter of the hall and redefining them as shallow pilasters. In the two or three places where this plaster has been damaged, one can still make out the distinctive ornamental forms that identify them as sixteenth-century versions of the *citrakbanda* column type, which was employed exclusively by Vijayanagara architects and their patrons. Because *citrakbanda* columns were never used in contemporary Bi-

⁴ Grabar (1987:43). For a broader discussion of various categories of *tropaia* in Islamic art, see Leisten (1996).

japuri architecture, retaining these original columns would have served as a constant reminder of the building's Vijayanagara origins, and accordingly they were visually redefined. The second component of the redefinition involved the fabrication of new elements that embodied the Bijapuri metropolitan style – the piers, arches, brackets, eaves and stucco ornament that are its most characteristic attributes (Fig. 1). Understandably, these elements were concentrated along the mosque's entrance façade, this being the most public face of the building.



Fig. 9: Adoni, fort mosque, interior showing rubble and stucco alterations undertaken during Bijapur's occupation

One wonders, however, about the four reused Chalukya columns in the centre of the hall and how they would have been treated in this redefinition of the mosque (Fig. 3). Intriguingly, there is no physical evidence to suggest that they were ever plastered over to hide their distinctive forms, as was done with the Vijayanagara-style columns (Fig. 9). This means that the distinctive forms of these four columns would have stood out quite boldly in the middle of the hall, in strong juxtaposition to the more typical Bijapuri vocabulary of pilasters, blind arches and alcoves surrounding them on the inner surfaces

of the walls. If this was indeed the case, then it is still necessary to account for the Bijapuri patron's seemingly deliberate embrace of these unusual Chalukya column forms.

The answer to this puzzle is a simple one: Chalukya relics were as highly prized at Bijapur as they were at Vijayanagara, and for many of the same reasons. Bijapur itself had been a prominent Chalukya town formerly known as Vijayapura, and all of the territory ruled by Bijapur's sultans had been part of the Chalukya empire. The countryside was still studded with Chalukya ruins, as well as with monumental stone inscriptions issued by Chalukya emperors. These Sanskrit inscriptions would have been fully legible to the Brahmins who had dominated Bijapur's revenue administration since the 1530s under Ibrahim 'Adil Shah I. Given his strong identification with the local vernacular culture, it was only natural that Ibrahim should have been captivated by the imperial legacy of the Chalukyas, and it is not surprising that he should express this through the display of physical Chalukya relics. Much as at Vijayanagara, but a good twenty years earlier, Ibrahim oversaw the collection of antique Chalukya columns so that they could be placed in a prominent location flanking the main entrance to his citadel at Bijapur (Fig. 10). And just outside this entrance, he placed a monumental Chalukya inscription stela, which opened with the Chalukya ruler's imperial titles and also happened to mention the city of Bijapur, underscoring the historical continuities between this provincial centre of the Chalukyas and the 'Adil Shahi capital. The message would have been unmistakable, namely that Ibrahim was on one level an inheritor of the Chalukya imperium.

When Ibrahim's son 'Ali captured Adoni a generation later, he would have immediately recognized the four antique columns in the mosque for what they were: valuable and imperially charged Chalukya relics. While 'Ali would have seen the *citrakbanda* columns of the outer circuit as emblematic of Vijayanagara – the state with which he had been in conflict and which he had finally vanquished – he would have viewed the four antique columns as relics of the Deccan's more distant past, and specifically of a time when the entire region had been united under the sway of a single imperial power. Now that 'Ali had defeated Vijayanagara and was in the process of annexing that state's former territories, he was moving even closer than his father to the goal of inheriting the Chalukya imperium. It is no wonder, then, that he had all traces of the Vijayanagara columns erased by plastering over their distinctive forms, even as he carefully preserved the four imperial Chalukya pillars in all their pristine splendour.



Fig. 10: Bijapur, Chalukya columns reused in main entrance gate to the citadel, constructed by Ibrahim 'Adil Shah in 1538–1539

Indeed, his appreciation of these columns in the Adoni mosque may well have been one of the factors shaping his response, just a few years later, to a well-preserved Chalukya temple in the former Vijayanagara fort at Bankapur, which he occupied in 1575. There, we have a contemporary account written by one of 'Ali's boon companions, Rafi al-Din Shirazi, testifying to the enthusiastic response of the Bijapuri elite to the local temple architecture. 'In the Bankapur region', writes Shirazi,

there is a town called Lakshmeshwar, the ancient capital of a great infidel ruler. Kings and nobles imitated one another in perfecting architecture and in building many exquisite and grand temples. In subsequent years, many of these have fallen into a state of ruin. But some remain standing, and four hundred temples are completely intact, having been built with the utmost of painstaking and elegant workmanship. When we saw them, we were struck with awe.⁵

Shirazi's account helps provide additional context for understanding 'Ali's response to one of these impressive, abandoned temples that still remained standing in Bankapur's fort. With a minimum of interference, he had his builders convert the temple's vast sixty-pillared hall into a mosque, which they did simply by straightening out the re-entrant angles in its western wall and providing it with a *mibrab*. Although the small figural sculptures ornamenting the hall's outer surfaces were chiselled off so as not to offend the religious sensibilities of the Muslims praying inside, the temple itself, lying behind the mosque's western wall, was evidently left intact, judging by its very good state of preservation today.

It should by now be apparent that the history of the Adoni fort mosque is a complex one. It can be summarized as follows: Sometime in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, at some other site far to the west of Adoni, a Hindu temple was constructed in the Chalukya style. Nearly five hundred years later, long after that temple had fallen into disuse, a Vijayanagara patron took four of the dilapidated temple's columns and had them brought to Adoni. There, he had his builders use them as the centrepiece of a mosque he was founding for the use of the Muslim soldiers in his garrison. The builders naturally employed the contemporary style of metropolitan Vijayanagara, which was customarily used in both the capital and the provinces when

⁵ Rafi al-Din Shirazi, "Tazkirat al-Muluk", translated from the unpublished critical edition of Abu Nasr Khalidi in possession of Carl Ernst. Quoted in Eaton and Wagoner (2014:145, 156 note 2).

constructing religious buildings, whether temples or mosques. The antique forms of the Chalukya columns in the mosque's central bay were deliberately juxtaposed with the contemporary style of the hall's peripheral columns as a visual claim to the imperial legitimacy of the Vijayanagara ruler. Some eighteen years later, after Adoni had fallen to Vijayanagara's Bijapuri rivals, the fort's occupiers modified the forms of the mosque as part of a political statement asserting that the fort was now theirs. This they did through a three-fold strategy. First, they erased the most prominent traces of its former political affiliation by plastering over its Vijayanagara-style *chitrakbanda* columns. Second, they redefined the building as Bijapur's by constructing a new façade in the style of metropolitan Bijapur. Third, they carefully preserved the antique Chalukya relics in the centre of the mosque, thus affirming that it was their polity – not Vijayanagara's – that was to be understood as the genuine successor to the Chalukyas' imperial legacy.

It is instructive to compare this sixteenth-century understanding of these pillars with the way they were evidently understood four centuries later, when the Hindu youths attacked the building in 1977. Facing the reused pillars, the youths appear to have experienced a sense of violation arising from their recognition that the pillars had originally belonged to a Hindu temple but were now supporting the ceiling of a mosque. They seem to have read the building's message disjunctively, understanding that a 'Muslim' religious structure had displaced a Hindu one that had earlier occupied the site, and that the mosque's builders had reused its pillars as symbolic tokens of the superiority of Islam. There is a pervasive irony here in that, not only was the structure originally built as a mosque rather than a temple, but also that it was built by a Hindu patron to accommodate the religious needs of his Muslim subjects. Moreover, the Hindu patron of the building employed the antique Chalukya columns not at all disjunctively, but rather as forms intended to affirm the links between the present and an idealized political past. What the youths did not recognize is that, in earlier times, building components from Hindu temples were reused not only in mosques, but also in other Hindu temples, as well as in the palace complexes of Hindu rulers, and even in mosques founded by Hindu patrons for their Muslim subjects. Instead of invoking an implacable enmity between monolithic Hindu and Muslim communities, this historicized understanding enables us to glimpse a more nuanced world in which Muslim Turks served in Vijayanagara's army, fighting in wars that might pit them against their fellow Muslims, and in which Brahmans served in the revenue adminis-

tration of Bijapur, transmitting to their sultanate masters a knowledge of the remembered Deccani past. Instead of seeing architectural style as a marker of religious identity, it shows us a world in which stylistic forms resonated far more strongly with political identities, both those of the sixteenth century and those of the Deccan's much earlier past.

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