

Kishkindha Kanda: Mythic Geography and Literary Memory of Hampi

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Abstract—The granitic expanse of Hampi, nestled along the Tungabhadra River in southern India, occupies a unique position in the cultural imagination of the Indian subcontinent. It exists simultaneously as the archaeological site of the imperial capital of Vijayanagara and as the epic landscape of Kishkindha, the monkey kingdom depicted in the *Ramayana*. This paper examines how physical topographies transform into enduring repositories of literary and sacred memory. By framing Hampi through the analytical lenses of cultural memory, spatial narration, and literary geography, this study investigates how epic narratives interact with concrete, architectural spaces across centuries. Rather than treating physical geography and oral or textual traditions as separate domains, this research demonstrates how the landscape of Hampi functions as an active palimpsest where mythic geography and historic reality continuously shape each other.

Through an analysis of the terrain's distinctive geological features, temple iconography, and enduring ritual practices, the study argues that Hampi operates as a *lieu de memoir* (site of memory) where the boundaries between mythic time and historic time become fluid. The boulders of Rishyamuka Hill, the waters of Pampa Sarovar, and the sculpted walls of the Hazara Rama Temple do not merely illustrate the *Ramayana*; they anchor collective identity, sustain sacred topographies, and mediate the afterlife of epic literature. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how literary memory relies on material landscape to remain living, and how geography itself acquires narrative agency through the ongoing dialogue between epic myth and human heritage.

Keywords

Kishkindha Kanda, Hampi, Mythic Geography, Cultural Memory, Literary Geography, Spatial Narration, Vijayanagara Empire, Lieux de Mémoire

INTRODUCTION

Landscapes have the power to transcend the geographical identity to reflect the memories, belief and culture. In literary narratives places are not just physical setting but dynamic spaces where collective memory and the history converge to create the cultural identity. Such landscapes obtain symbolisms and significance through narratives.

Hampi, the forgotten city located on the banks of Tungabhadra River in Karnataka illustrates the convergence of geography and narrative. Hampi simultaneously occupies the sacred position of Indian History and internationally recognized as the capital of Vijayanagara Empire and a UNESCO world heritage site through its enduring association with Kishkindha Kanda of the Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

The Hampi markets, royal enclosures, water systems and temples are celebrated and documented by archeological investigators and historians and the historical significance have concentered in the history of India. Remembering one of the wealthiest and most sophisticated cities not only in South India but in the whole Asia. The capital of Vijayanagara flourished between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries before its destruction in late sixteenth century. The empire declined politically but the surviving ruins remind its archeological brilliance and artistic accomplishments. Today these monuments attract the many tourist, historians, archeologists, pilgrims from across the world transforming Hampi as the symbol of India's cultural heritage.

Hampi is deeply embedded in mythological consciousness of India. To the long-standing religious traditions, Hampi stands tall as it is the great Kishkindha, the kingdom of Vanaras in The Kishkindha Kanda. Understanding Hampi requires looking beyond the binary of historical fact versus mythological fiction. Instead, it invites an examination of how cultural memory works through space. As physical structures weather into ruins, the underlying mythic geography often retains its structural integrity, preserving stories across generations. By examining the literary geography of the *Kishkindha Kanda* alongside the material heritage of Hampi, this paper investigates how landscape acts as an active partner in literary transmission, transforming space into a permanent container for collective memory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between physical space, literature, and memory has generated significant scholarly interest across literary studies, geography, and heritage studies. Central to this inquiry is Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, which distinguishes between communicative memory—the short-term, everyday recollections shared within living generations—and cultural memory, which is long-term, institutionalized, and anchored in objectified culture such as texts, monuments, and rituals. Assmann highlights how cultural memory requires "fixed points" in time and space to remain stable across generations. Hampi functions precisely as such a fixed point, anchoring the fluid, oral traditions of the *Ramayana* within a permanent geological and architectural framework.

Pierre Nora's conceptualization of *lieux de Mémoire* (sites of memory) provides another essential framework for analysing how physical environments retain historical and emotional significance. Nora argues that sites of memory arise when traditional communities of memory break down, necessitating concrete, physical locations where memory condenses and crystallizes. In the context of post-medieval South India, the ruins of Hampi serve as a monumental site of memory. The physical remnants of the

Vijayanagara state, intertwined with ancient topographical sacredness, allow successive generations to re-engage with lost imperial splendor and eternal mythic narratives simultaneously.

In the realm of spatial narration and literary geography, scholars such as Franco Moretti and Bertrand Westphal have demonstrated that space in literature is rarely a passive backdrop. Westphal's geocriticism emphasizes the real and fictional interactions within space, arguing that real-world locations are continuously shaped by the literary representations superimposed upon them. In Indian art history and indology, scholars like Anila Verghese and Fritz A. Krusiec have documented the specific ways the Vijayanagara state mobilized the local traditions of Pampa and the regional geography of Kishkindha to construct a distinct socio-religious identity. Verghese's extensive fieldwork demonstrates how royal patrons systematically built temples at sites already marked by epic legend, effectively fusing imperial politics with epic mythology.

Furthermore, dynamic models of heritage studies, such as those proposed by Laurajane Smith, shift the focus from heritage as a static set of monuments to heritage as a performative cultural process. Smith argues that heritage is not merely what is preserved on site, but the meaning-making practices that occur when people interact with space. Building upon these scholars, this paper seeks to bridge the gap between material heritage and literary interpretation, demonstrating how epic texts and granite topographies co-author the cultural landscape of Hampi.

Research Gap

While existing historical and archaeological scholarship on Hampi offers meticulous documentation of Vijayanagara architecture, urban planning, and epigraphy, literary analyses often treat the physical terrain of Hampi as a secondary illustration of the *Ramayana* rather than an active narrative force. Conversely, literary studies of the *Kishkindha Kanda* frequently analyze the text in isolation from its physical geographical coordinates, treating Kishkindha as an abstract literary imaginary.

There remains a distinct need for an integrated literary and spatial analysis that reads the physical landscape of Hampi as a text alongside the written traditions of the *Ramayana*. This paper addresses this gap by examining how geography, architecture, and literary memory perform a unified interpretive role, demonstrating how the physical ruins and natural landforms of Hampi actively dictate, preserve, and reshape the reception of epic literature over centuries.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To investigate how the physical landscape of Hampi is transformed into the mythic realm of Kishkindha through spatial narration and literary geography.
2. To analyse the role of Vijayanagara monumental architecture, particularly the Hazara Rama Temple, as an embodiment of cultural memory that codifies epic literature into stone.
3. To examine how the interweaving of natural topographies, imperial ruins, and living ritual practices maintains Hampi's status as a dynamic *lieu de memoir*.
4. To explore the theoretical dialogue between historical reality and mythic imagination in shaping collective identity and heritage.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology combining literary criticism, spatial analysis, and heritage studies frameworks. Textually, the paper draws upon close readings of key passages from the *Kishkindha Kanda* of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, examining descriptions of topographies, botanical markers, and spatial dynamics. These literary descriptions are mapped conceptually onto the physical terrain and architectural program of the Hampi UNESCO World Heritage site.

Conceptually, the paper uses theoretical models of cultural memory (Jan Assmann) and sites of memory (Pierre Nora) to analyze how material ruins and natural landforms encode meaning. The analysis uses geocritical methods to evaluate the bidirectional relationship between place and story—how the text constructs the place, and how the physical place preserves, alters, and perpetuates the text. By combining textual evidence with spatial and iconographic analysis, the research interprets the landscape as an active medium of cultural continuity.

DISCUSSION

I. The Geological Palimpsest: Granitic Wilderness as Epic Terrain

The physical landscape of Hampi presents an extraordinary visual theatre. Massive granitic boulders, weathered over millions of years into precarious piles and fragmented ridges, dominate the horizon. The Tungabhadra River cuts through these grey and ochre stones, creating pockets of intense green foliage against an otherwise stark, primeval backdrop. It is precisely this dramatic natural architecture that allows the terrain to be so readily reimagined as Kishkindha, the ancient kingdom of the Vanaras. In the *Kishkindha Kanda*, Valmiki describes a land defined by dramatic peaks, hidden caves, dense forests, and unpredictable waters—a landscape of elemental intensity that mirrors the untamed energy of its non-human inhabitants.

When reading the text against the physical terrain, landscape ceases to be a passive backdrop and becomes an active narrative medium. The boulders of Rishyamuka Hill are not merely natural rock formations; in local literary memory, they are the very stones cast down during epic battles, or the secluded retreat where Sugriva sought refuge from his brother Vali. The physical cave known as Sugriva's Cave, situated near the riverbank, features natural rock striations that local tradition interprets as the marks left by the multi-coloured garments dropped by Sita as she was carried away through the sky by Ravana. Through this process of narrative mapping, natural geological features receive specific literary meanings.

This dynamic illustrates what geographers' term spatial narration: the process by which physical environments are rendered legible through story. The terrain does not hide its age; its visible fractures and monumental scale lend credibility to the epic events attributed to it. The sheer physical resistance of the granite landscape matches the grand scale of the *Ramayana*. The river Pampa, flowing steadily through the rocky wilderness, acts as a continuous thread connecting the seasonal grief of Rama to the living present of the contemporary visitor. The physical land does not merely illustrate the book; it authenticates the narrative, providing tangible evidence for intangible cultural memory.

II. Architecture as Codified Memory: The Vijayanagara Empire and Imperial Legitimization

If nature provided the initial canvas for mythic geography in Hampi, the rulers of the Vijayanagara Empire (1336–1565 CE) transformed that canvas into an enduring architectural monument. The founders of the empire, Harihara I and Bukka I, deliberately chose this site for their capital, recognizing that settling within the epic geography of Kishkindha offered immense political and spiritual legitimacy. By placing their throne within the sacred landscape of Rama's epic journey, the Vijayanagara kings framed their rule not as a new political project, but as a continuation of righteous, cosmic order (*dharma*).

The built environment of Hampi was systematically designed to mirror this epic inheritance. The Hazara Rama Temple, situated at the heart of the royal centre, functions as a masterwork of architectural codification. The exterior walls of the temple complex are carved with continuous relief panels depicting the narrative of the *Ramayana* from start to finish. Here, literary memory is translated directly into stone. The relief sculptures do not merely adorn the structure; they dictate how the viewer moves through the sacred space. As one walks around the temple, the narrative unfolds sequentially, creating a physical experience of reading.

Crucially, the treatment of the *Kishkindha Kanda* episodes within the Hazara Rama Temple displays a localized detail. Scenes portraying the meeting of Rama and Hanuman, the pact made over the sacred fire, the duel between Vali and Sugriva, and the eventual coronation of Sugriva are carved with distinct iconographic emphasis. By sculpting these specific events into the walls of an imperial temple, the Vijayanagara state achieved a powerful synthesis of local landscape and universal epic. The temple acts as a mirror to the surrounding hills: the stories carved on the interior walls correspond directly to the physical topographies visible just outside the temple gates.

Through this architectural program, memory is given concrete form. As Jan Assmann notes, cultural memory relies on objectified carriers to withstand the erosive effects of time. The temples of Hampi—with their sculpted friezes, pillared halls, and processional avenues—served as institutionalized carriers of memory. They ensured that the *Kishkindha Kanda* was not merely remembered as a distant literary text composed in Sanskrit, but experienced daily as a lived, localized political reality.

III. The Afterlife of Myth: Ruins, Absence, and the Persistence of Memory

In 1565, following the Battle of Talikota, the city of Vijayanagara was systematically sacked, burned, and abandoned. The great urban metropolis collapsed, its royal palaces were reduced to stone platforms, its carved pillars were fractured, and its vast population scattered. Yet, while the historical empire collapsed, the mythic geography of Kishkindha endured. This survival reveals a fundamental dynamic of cultural memory: physical ruins often amplify, rather than destroy, the mythic resonance of a place.

In its post-imperial state, Hampi became a profound *lieu de mémoire*. Pierre Nora emphasizes that sites of memory exist precisely because the lived continuity of history has been broken. The physical ruin stands as a sign of loss, a space where memory must be intentionally recalled. In Hampi, the fragmented state of the architectural monuments creates a poetic tension between historical absence and mythic presence. The royal structures lie in roofless decay, but the granite hills of Kishkindha remain intact. The loss of political power allowed the older, deeper layer of epic memory to resurface and dominate the landscape once more.

Visiting Hampi today, one encounters a landscape where time operates on multiple levels. There is the deep geological time of the ancient stone formations; the mythic time of the *Ramayana*, which exists outside historic chronology; the historic time of the Vijayanagara Empire, marked by its ruined monuments; and the living present of pilgrims and local communities. This temporal stacking is preserved through continuous ritual practices. At the Virupaksha Temple, which survived the destruction of 1565, worship has continued uninterrupted for over a millennium. On the slopes of Malyavanta Hill, where Rama is believed to have waited out the monsoon months while searching for Sita, the chanting of the *Ramayana* continues day and night inside the rustic Raghunatha Temple.

These continuous practices demonstrate that memory in Hampi is performative. It is not confined to static museum displays or scholarly texts; it is continually recreated through acts of pilgrimage, recitation, and spatial engagement. The ruin does not signal an ending, but an invitation to remember. The shattered archways and empty throne platforms do not erase the epic narrative; they frame it, allowing the natural landscape to step forward once again as the primary bearer of the story.

IV. Literary Geography and the Sacred Imagination

The concept of literary geography requires us to examine not only how literature describes places, but how real places shape literary reception and cultural imagination. In the case of Hampi and the *Kishkindha Kanda*, this relationship is thoroughly reciprocal. The text gives the physical landscape a narrative identity, while the physical landscape gives the text a material anchor.

When Valmiki composed the *Kishkindha Kanda*, the text utilized evocative botanical, atmospheric, and geographical descriptions to convey internal emotional states. The arrival of the monsoon on Malyavanta Hill is described with poetic richness: heavy clouds obscure the sky, the air smells of wet earth and blossoming *kadamba* flowers, and the swollen streams mirror Rama's turbulent grief. When one stands on Malyavanta Hill during the rainy season, observing the dark rain clouds sweeping over the granitic plains, the boundary between textual representation and physical experience becomes thin. The physical atmosphere authenticates the emotional truth of the literary passage.

This dynamic demonstrates what literary geographers describe as the spatialization of emotion. The landscape of Hampi is not merely an aesthetic background; it carries distinct emotional meanings linked to key events in the narrative. The riverbanks represent alliance and hope; the isolated hilltops signal longing and sorrow; the deep rock shelters offer protection and strategic retreat. Readers and pilgrims who navigate this terrain perform an act of embodied reading. By walking across the terrain, climbing the stone steps of Anjanadri Hill—reputed to be the birthplace of Hanuman—and looking out over the river valley, they move through the story itself.

This spatialization of literature protects the narrative from fading into abstract myth. By remaining grounded in a tangible, physical landscape, the epic stays anchored to the earth. The geography of Hampi provides physical proof for the literary imagination, allowing successive generations to feel that the events of the epic unfolded right here, on these very stones.

V. Heritage, Identity, and the Dialogue Between Myth and History

In contemporary discussions of heritage studies, sites like Hampi are often caught between competing frameworks of interpretation. Professional archaeology prioritizes physical preservation, architectural categorization, and historical documentation, often seeking to isolate historical facts from mythical narratives. Conversely, traditional communities and pilgrims interact with the site primarily through local folklore, sacred geography, and living devotion, caring less for sixteenth-century construction dates than for timeless epic associations.

Rather than viewing these two approaches as mutually exclusive, an integrated cultural memory framework shows how myth and history constantly enrich one another. The history of the Vijayanagara Empire is incomprehensible without its mythic grounding in

Kishkindha; the kings deliberately used this epic association to craft their imperial identity. Similarly, the local memory of Kishkindha would lack its monumental physical footprint without the grand architectural additions made by Vijayanagara rulers. Hampi demonstrates that heritage is not a static collection of ancient artifacts, but an ongoing process of cultural engagement. The identity of the site is shaped by this balance between historic fact and literary imagination. When a tourist or pilgrim stands near the King's Balance or walks down the broad Bazaar street toward the Virupaksha temple, they experience a site shaped equally by imperial ambition and epic storytelling. The stones belong to history; the landscape belongs to myth; and the cultural memory born of their union belongs to the living present.

CONCLUSION

Hampi presents an extraordinary landscape where granite topographies, imperial ruins, and literary memory remain intertwined. Through its long association with the *Kishkindha Kanda* of the *Ramayana*, this terrain demonstrates how physical geography can transform into a living narrative text. The jagged hills, quiet rivers, and rock shelters of Hampi do not merely illustrate an ancient epic; they anchor it in the earth, offering a tangible environment where mythic events continue to resonate.

By applying the frameworks of cultural memory, *lieux de mémoire*, and literary geography, this paper has shown how the Vijayanagara state translated epic narrative into monumental architecture, using the sacred status of Kishkindha to legitimize its political vision. When the empire fell into ruin, the underlying mythic landscape endured, preserving the site's identity through centuries of political and social change. The fragmented temples and silent rock formations of Hampi continue to function as active spaces of memory, where ritual practice and poetic imagination keep the past alive.

Ultimately, Hampi reveals that literature is not confined to paper or memory alone. It can take root in landscapes, carved into granite walls, and preserved in the flow of rivers. In the quiet meeting of stone, river, and story, Hampi remains what it has been for centuries: a place where the geography of the earth and the geography of the imagination become one.

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