

Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance.
South India through European Eyes, 1250-1650.*
(Cambridge University Press, 2005.)

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My first encounter with this book – published now a good five years ago - took place at a time when a number of scholars were still sceptical of the new cultural history as informed by the linguistic turn, taking it to be a *potpourri* of self-indulgent and personalised readings of agreeable and often easily accessible texts. Travellers like Pietro della Valle, moreover, as Rubiés himself intimates (p. 365), were often themselves runaways from their own societies, footloose voyeurs prone to pompous self-introductions and exaggerated self-worth, as the Queen of Olaza deduced from their encounter in 1623. One of the virtues of a field such as economic history, by contrast, is that things can be precisely measured: our grails, concepts such as value, actually mean something tangible thanks to a metric scheme of measurement. During the period in which economic history was dominant, mathematics was an entire discipline at our disposal and which provided a battery of refined tools of investigation.

Cultural history has since come to be considered on the up-and-up, and it is one of the tributes to Rubiés's book that it was prescient enough to open debates such as the value of travel narratives in the interpretation of domestic cultural shifts - for example, the shift towards scepticism and rationalism in the seventeenth century. In *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance*, Joan-Pau Rubiés also offers clearly established analytical schemes, or multi-faced lines of investigation, for the analysis of these travel accounts, which he spells out in the Preface. These include an investigation of the education of the authors under analysis and of the rhetorical rules according to which they operated (a classical Cambridge line as fostered by historians of political thought such as Quentin Skinner); the political and personal purpose of their texts, and social questions such as patronage; and perhaps most intriguingly, the authors' 'experience of otherness'.

There are still aspects of the cultural theory that Rubiés applies that I find irksome: for example, the late '90s postmodernist reduction of the history of culture to the history of various language-games. This position is too relativist, and not self-conscious enough of alternative positions. Rubiés himself, in analysing the problem with the history of *mentalités* and its reduction of social thinking to one singular monolith (fn. 12, xvi), unwittingly puts his finger on a problem of the relativist position: that perhaps there is a 'high culture' and a 'low culture', and that some cultures stand the all-important test of time better than others, which is some measure of their achievement.

That said, this is an enormously ambitious book: intellectually, it transcends earlier investigations of the social worlds of Asia that Europeans encountered, such as Michael Pearson's *The Portuguese in India*, C.U.P., 1987. One of the ways Rubiés accomplishes this is through an explicit acknowledgement of the growth of a scientific/academic discipline back in Europe, namely ethnology, which served as a template relative to which the texts under study were produced. The book is also ambitious in the swathes it cuts through history itself, from Marco Polo through to the origins of Enlightenment, and in the careful typologies the author constructs as to the types of traveller and the texts they produced.

Although Rubiés is courageous enough to undertake an analysis of non-European historiographies, namely the Muslim historians of India, drawing together some worthwhile conclusions as to the benefits of European accounts and which he contends lie in the self-questioning of the validity of their observations, one key component in this intellectual march is to my eye lacking. This consists in the respect due to the classical foundations of knowledge, for it is clear how much the Christian Latin medieval discourse overlaid and responded to the discourse produced in Antiquity. I am primarily referring to Pliny, as we find in discussions of the Brahmins (or Bracmenes), but also to lesser-known precursors, authors like Megasthenes and Ctesias the Knedian who wrote up Alexander the Great's momentous encounters with the civilizations of the East in the 4th century B.C. It is from these ancient and early encounters, the Belgian historian Albert Deman would tell us, that the essential tropes of Western thought regarding the Orient sprang: luxury, exuberance and superabundance, and which we find echoed in Edward Said's thesis of orientalism so much further down the road. Rubiés of course engages with Said and the orientalist thesis early on in his book (fn. 9, xiv) – he criticises Said for failing to stretch his reading of sources back to the Renaissance, and for over-emphasising the projection of discourse from the West without any substantive intellectual engagement.

A third recognition of the significant contribution of this book consists in bringing to our attention types of European engagement long overlooked in conventional historiography, especially the missionary discourse on South Indian religion (chapter 9). As Rubiés explains, not only had the legacy of Jesuit Visitor Alessandro Valignano been to emphasize the 'white' mission fields of China and Japan, but the intellectual debate back home in Europe was more preoccupied with China and the American Indians than a political entity such as Vijayanagar, which had lost its political centre. Consequently, Rubiés is able to make use of hitherto unpublished and little known texts from the Jesuit archive in Goa, such as Rubino's *Account of the main things of the kingdom of Vijayanagar* (1608), as well as Portuguese missionary treatises by Azevedo, Fenicio, Gonçalves and Fernandes. Herein lies the primary value of this book to researchers of Portuguese history - the sixteenth century accounts of Pais and Nunes on the realities of Vijayanagar, which have been the object of repeated critical re-editions since Robert Sewell's translation at the end of the nineteenth century. Rubiés develops an interesting discussion of what was at stake in the theological contest between Gonçalo Fernandes and Roberto de Nobili, in which he takes a slightly different line from other scholars currently working on this problem, like Ines Županov.

By the time I reached the conclusion of this deep and thought-provoking book, I found myself more inclined to side with Rubiés and his carefully considered typologies of genre than with Patricia Seed, whom he mentions (fn. 6, 393), and whose work uses the separate national-linguistic domains as a tool for interpreting the European encounter with the New World. Rubiés is adroit enough to transcend the reduction of intellectual affinities to national allegiance, which he admits does play a role as in della Valle's typically Italian seventeenth century scorn for the socially repressive realities that bely the Portuguese projection of 'Golden Goa'. Beyond this,

however, Rubiés reminds us that we need to look at evolving languages of civility, whilst not neglecting a further language, receding into the horizons, namely that of confessional loyalty.
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