



Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia (Mary Flexner Lectures of Bryn Mawr College)

By Sanjay Subrahmanyam

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Cross-cultural encounters in Europe and Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries brought the potential for bafflement, hostility, and admiration. The court was the crucial site where expanding Eurasian states and empires met and were forced to make sense of one another. By looking at these interactions, *Courtly Encounters* provides a fresh cross-cultural perspective on the worlds of early modern Islam, Counter-Reformation Catholicism, Protestantism, and a newly emergent Hindu sphere.

Both individual agents and objects such as texts and paintings helped mediate encounters between courts, which possessed rules and conventions that required decipherment and translation, whether in words or in pictures. Sanjay Subrahmanyam gives special attention to the depiction of South Asian empires in European visual representations, finding a complex history of cultural exchange: the Mughal paintings that influenced Rembrandt and other seventeenth-century Dutch painters had themselves been earlier influenced by Dutch naturalism. *Courtly Encounters* provides a rich array of images from Europe, the Islamic world, India, and Southeast Asia as aids for understanding the reciprocal nature of cross-cultural exchanges. It also looks closely at how insults and strategic use of martyrdom figured in courtly encounters.

As he sifts through the historical record, Subrahmanyam finds little evidence for the cultural incommensurability many ethnohistorians have insisted on. Most often, he discovers negotiated ways of understanding one another that led to mutual improvisation, borrowing, and eventually change.

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Editorial Review

Review

Every page of this book is like a voyage of discovery. Subrahmanyam illustrates how encounters between peoples did not just take place 'out there' in the peripheries of imperial systems, but also in the very nerve centers of power, the imperial courts of Eurasia. From Persia to Aceh, royal households were settings for the making of mutual perceptions of Muslims, Christians and Hindus?with powerful visual and textual accounts of sharing, killing, and martyrdom. While so much of world history accents the strangeness of global encounters, Subrahmanyam brilliantly illuminates how much intimacy was laced into the intrigue and violence of courtly systems. (Jeremy Adelman, Princeton University)

No historian paints on a broader canvas, or with more pointillist precision, than Sanjay Subrahmanyam. His account of courtly cultural interaction ranges across centuries and continents, helping us understand encounters as diverse as those of Moctezuma and Cortés, Timur the Great and the ambassadors of the Emperor Hung Wu. His theoretical acumen gives us new tools with which to think about the translation, transmission, and transformation of cultures. And his seemingly endless knowledge of sources in countless languages and artistic genres teaches us about the history of nearly everything, from the uses of gunpowder to the iconography of halos. Like a great museum, *Courtly Encounters* is a book to be visited again and again. (David Nirenberg, University of Chicago)

Through an intriguing set of early modern events and the texts and images that emerged from them, *Courtly Encounters* considers the commensurability of cultures, memory and forgetting, imperial court violence and intimacy, the language of martyrdom, and the ebb and flow of images, ideas, and texts back and forth across Eurasia. After a scholarly lifetime of seeking out connected histories, Sanjay Subrahmanyam is alive to the lived experience of the past and its capacity to upend historical accounts narrowed by visions of 'Europe' and 'Asia' as separate spheres with separated histories. All historians should pay attention to his conclusion that encounters between societies don't just happen, but are made, and they are made, not between whole societies, but in fragments and fractions, including at the individual level. (Pamela H. Smith, Columbia University)

Subrahmanyam is a master historian to whom we owe yet another dazzling and penetrating account of how Europe and Asia interacted before modern colonialism. He unravels the creative and often idiosyncratic mix of emulation, coercion, and sheer improvisation that allowed people of disparate backgrounds to absorb and make sense of each other's traditions. Both the skeptics and the romantics in matters of cross-cultural encounters will find *Courtly Encounters* a rewarding and provocative read. (Francesca Trivellato, Yale University)

A splendid book of felicitous erudition and critical inquiry, which should make the readers think afresh...*Courtly Encounters* does not give a naïve picture of cultural assimilation. Nor does it suggest that cultural encounters and transactions should only be located in courtly high culture. Instead, it provides certain historical contexts, in which cultures meet, collide, coalesce, growl at each other and negotiate with one another at the same time, and with easy conscience...History playfully provides many instances of cultural encounters and dialogues. That history defies a single, simple narrative indeed constitutes its richness. This book decants it in full measure. (B. Surendra Rao *The Hindu* 2012-11-27)

About the Author

Sanjay Subrahmanyam is Distinguished Professor and Irving & Jean Stone Chair in Social Sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles.

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