

# NAVIGATING THE SEAS OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE: HERNANDO COLÓN AND THE NEW WORLD OF BOOKS

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## *I. Maps and Compasses: Navigating (and Not Getting Lost) in a Universal Library*

A few years ago, Edward Wilson-Lee published a revolutionary book: the intellectual biography of Hernando Colón (1488–1539).<sup>1</sup> In that volume, the author recounted the story of this Renaissance collector-navigator, the natural son of Christopher Columbus, and his extraordinary adventure as a bibliomaniac. Yet, unlike previous studies on Colón, primarily intended for scholars, Wilson-Lee's volume significantly broadened the range of readership. Thus even readers with little interest in the history of libraries learned that in Spain, between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, there lived a unique man with a singular ambition: to collect and catalogue all human knowledge. In Seville, Colón established what has been defined as the first universal library, in which he intended to house « all the books, in all languages and disciplines, that can be found within Christendom and beyond ». But this pioneering documentation center – the first of its kind in the Western world – was not solely intended to house great texts of literature, philosophy, theology, and other 'lofty' disciplines. It was conceived to collect mostly ephemeral typographical products, material testimonies of 'popular' written culture which, because of their physical fragility, risked disappearing and being forgotten. To safeguard this universal knowledge, and to help readers navigate the complex

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<sup>1</sup> EDWARD WILSON-LEE, *The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books: Young Columbus and the Quest for a Universal Library*, William Collins, London 2018. Aside from the numerous reviews of the book published in major newspapers and magazines such as the *Washington Post* and *The Spectator*, see the detailed review of the book published by TREVOR J. DADSON in *Hispanic Research Journal*, 19 (2018), p. 430–432.

mechanism of his library, Colón created a series of cross-referenced cataloguing tools; these provided the coordinates and location of the works housed on the shelves and in boxes of the collection.

Much of Colón's time was dedicated to the universal library, but it was not the only project to which he was devoted during his short life. His obsession with collecting and organizing information led him to compose works on lexicography, cosmography, botany, and cartography. The goal of these projects was always the same: to summarize and preserve a complete knowledge of the world, either in a book, map, or garden. The literature on this extraordinary figure of the Renaissance European intellectual arena, and his pioneering ventures, has recently been enriched by José María Pérez Fernández and Edward Wilson-Lee. Their book, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, is the first entirely dedicated to reconstructing and interpreting Colón's projects, and to identifying their unique characteristics and points of commonality with other initiatives.<sup>2</sup> This well-constructed interdisciplinary volume is divided into five chapters, preceded by a general introduction. It concludes with a series of appendices, wherein the authors provide English translations of important documents related to the organization of Colón's universal library and geographical enterprises. The sections of the volume are linked by a narrative that highlights the uniform and systematic approach taken by Colón during each of his intellectual pursuits.

In the Introduction (p. 1–14), the authors emphasize Colón's range of interests and extraordinary skills in the field of information management. The desire to establish universal repositories of knowledge was certainly not original. Many scholars had embarked on similar enterprises, including the Italian humanists Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Coluccio Salutati, and Tommaso Parentucelli.<sup>3</sup> Each ventured to compile universal repertoires of knowledge, or conceptualize libraries that could contain the totality of human knowledge. However, the projects of these illustrious intellectuals were inevitably limited by a 'humanistic-aristocratic' perception of knowledge, which included works belonging to, or connected with, the classical Greek and Roman tradition; and they excluded works produced by the 'less educated'. Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee, by contrast, explain that it was precisely because of his mercantile background, connected with the proto-capitalist dimension of Renaissance society, that Colón was able to break down this gnoseological barrier in favor of a more concrete and universal view of written knowledge. His great familiarity with the

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<sup>2</sup> JOSÉ MARIA PERÉZ FERNÁNDEZ, EDWARD WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books. Toward a Cartography of Knowledge*, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 2021.

<sup>3</sup> On Parentucelli's *canone* and the genesis of his bibliographic project see CESARE VASOLI, « La biblioteca progettata da un Papa: Niccolò V e il 'suo canone' », *Babel*, 6 (2002), p. 219–239.

mercantile milieu, and experience traveling to the New World, allowed Colón to model his cataloguing tools on a system of collection and production of information based on an articulated « framework of agents and technologies ». This, in turn, enabled the recording and circulation of new information produced in the 'Bibliotheca Hernandina'.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 1 (« Life in the Library », p. 15–54) focuses on the genesis of Colón's most important and well-known project: the universal library. In these pages, Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee reconstruct Colón's book culture, its origins, evolution, and the approaches that led to the establishment of the largest and most diverse library of the early typographic age. With great skill, the two authors highlight the influence of Christopher Columbus' writing habits on his son's projects, and the ways in which Colón approached the world of books from his adolescence. This detailed book biography contains descriptions of Colón's bibliographic training and, above all, a fascinating and unprecedented analysis of his reading and writing habits. Specifically, the authors show how the practices of book annotation, developed by Colón, enable us to observe, for the first time, the obsession with the organization of knowledge that led him to conceive the universal library. The organization of knowledge, as envisioned by Colón, was not limited to the creation of indexes, catalogs, and other inventories. It also featured a pragmatic organizational component that would impact daily life within the walls of the Seville library. Colón employed collaborators who occupied different roles in his complex knowledge-storage system – librarians, indexers, gardeners, procurers of books – who carried out their tasks, with instructions given by Colón himself, to optimize the development, functionality, and survival of the library. In this way, the sophisticated organism of the 'Bibliotheca Hernandina' progressed and arrived ever closer to achieving the goal of its creator: to constitute a repository of knowledge for the benefit of all humanity.

In Chapter 2 (« Trade Secrets », p. 55–96), perhaps the most innovative chapter of the book, the authors analyze the complex and fascinating world of Renaissance mercantile civilization and highlight elements of the Colón family's commercial background that directly and profoundly influenced his projects. Colón was aware he would never succeed in completing his ambitious project alone and therefore elaborated an extensive program of information gathering and book acquisition. Just as his father had designed a network of maritime routes for the transit of goods, money, and information, between Spain and the New World, Colón established a complex network of intermediaries, on the mainland, subsidized by equally

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<sup>4</sup> PERÉZ FERNÁNDEZ, WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, p. 7.

sophisticated financial transactions. This guaranteed an unending supply of books and news from the main centers of Europe to Seville. The undisputed protagonists of this continuous and unstoppable circle of information were the *obrezillas*, i.e. the printed pamphlets destined for rapid circulation and immediate use by the general European public, and which Colón considered essential for the creation of his universal library. I will discuss this topic and his interest in these typographical products later in more detail.

Chapter 3 (« Cartography », p. 97–124) is significantly shorter than the others, and focuses on Colón's cartographic projects and their theoretical and practical connections to the development of the universal library and its cataloguing tools. As *Piloto mayor* of the Casa de Contratación in Seville, Colón was responsible for gathering information on sea routes used by the imperial fleets. His experience with his father on maritime expeditions to the West, and Columbus' direct influence on his vision of cosmography and cartography, made Colón highly suitable for the role he was assigned by the emperor. At the same time, this wealth of experience allowed Colón to develop an innovative system of information management, which was vital to the cartographic projects of the imperial court.

Chapter 4 (« New World Order », p. 125–166) is undoubtedly the most dense and crucial chapter of the book. It is almost entirely dedicated to the catalogs of the universal library and to the new knowledge organizing system that Colón developed and perfected during his life.<sup>5</sup> The rediscovery in 2019 of the hitherto considered lost catalog of epitomes (*Libro de los Epitomes*), at the Arnemagnæan Institute in Copenhagen, has given new impetus to studies on the universal library. But it has also allowed Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee to provide a complete interpretive analysis of all the catalogs created by Colón for his great project.<sup>6</sup> Each index is essential for understanding and navigating his conception of a universal library.<sup>7</sup> But they were not

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<sup>5</sup> The first part of the chapter is indeed a comprehensive analysis of Colón's *Cosmografía*, *Vocabulario Latino* and catalog of prints (*Dibujos o Pinturas*). While Colón's collection of prints and its catalog have been thoroughly studied by Mark P. McDonald, his works in the fields of lexicography and cosmography wait to be further examined. MARK P. McDONALD, *The Print Collection of Ferdinand Columbus*, British Museum, London 2004.

<sup>6</sup> University of Copenhagen, Arnemagnæan Collection, Ms. Am 377 fol. On the rediscovery of the manuscript, see NURGUL KIVILCIM YAVUZ, *Hernando Colón's Book of Books: AM 377 fol.* (<https://manuscript.ku.dk/motm/hernando-colons-book-of-books/>, accessed March 2022).

<sup>7</sup> The catalogs devised by Colón for his universal repository were: the *Índice Numeral* or *Registrum B* (register of books by date of entry in the library); the *Índice General Alfabético* or *Abecedarium B* (alphabetical index); the *Libro de las Materias* (subject index); the *Libro de los Epitomes* (collection of book epitomes or abstracts); the *Tabla de Autores y Ciencias* or *Anotaciones* (subject-oriented catalog); the

simply aimed at determining the quantity and quality of the books housed at the library in Seville. Rather, by enabling continuous and multiple cross-references, Colón's catalogs serve as a bibliographic compass to orient users in the vast sea of universal knowledge. In establishing a library containing all knowledge recorded in the books up to that time, Colón was driven by the same spirit that led his father to venture into the unknown of Western maritime routes. And, as a scrupulous cartographer, Colón spent much of his life preparing maps, interrogation tools, reference indexes, and other instruments to identify, know, and absorb the ocean of universal human knowledge, housed within the walls of his library. These tools differed from other bibliographic repertoires at the time in terms of analytical thoroughness, organizational efficiency, wealth of information, and, above all, cross-reference functionality. Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee not only reconstruct the creation and function of each of Colón's catalogs, they also clearly establish the theoretical relationships between them. The catalogs, the authors tell us, because of their interoperability offer – for the first time in the history of modernity – the opportunity to see knowledge not as something abstract, but instead concrete and quantifiable. The library constitutes a multidimensional snapshot of universal knowledge, to be implemented for the benefit of human progress.

In the fifth and final chapter (« After Hernando », p. 167–198), the authors focus on the history of Colón's library, from the death of its founder to the present day. In these pages, the authors trace the most significant events in the history of the Biblioteca Colombina, that is, Colón's collection in the rooms of the Chapter of the Cathedral of Seville, where it has been since the mid-sixteenth century. Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee devote ample space to the history of scholars who, in past centuries, preserved the treasures of this extraordinary library. The authors importantly focus on the misadventures of the collection, which resulted in losses and damage; by the twentieth century the original collection had been reduced by more than two thirds. Part of the chapter is dedicated to book thefts that occurred in the nineteenth century, and to the public reaction following historian Henry Harrisse's condemnation of these

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*Índice de Autores y Obras* (general alphabetical index of authors and works). Other catalogs related to the development of the library organization were: the old *Memorial de los Libros Naufragados* or *Registrum A*; the *Índice Alfabético Antiguo* or *Abece-darium A*; the old book of *Autores y Ciencias*. A facsimile edition of the *Registrum B* was published at the beginning of the twentieth century by ARCHER M. HUNTINGTON, *Catalogue of the library of Ferdinand Columbus*, A.M. Huntington, New York 1905. On the occasion of the 1992 Columbus Celebration, the Chapter of the Cathedral of Seville published an excellent facsimile reproduction of the *Abece-darium B* and its *Supplementum*: HERNANDO COLÓN, *Abece-darium B y Supplementum*. Ed. facsímil de los manuscritos conservados en la Biblioteca Colombina de Sevilla, Fundación Mapfre América-Cabildo de la Catedral de Sevilla, Madrid 1992.

events.<sup>8</sup> Yet this and other scandals generated renewed interest in the history of the Biblioteca Colombina and its creator, which in turn gave rise in the twentieth century to modern Hernandine Studies.

Finally, the substantial appendix provides English speaking readers access to the most important documents related to Colón's life and intellectual undertakings. Juan Perez's *Memoria* (p. 201–226) and Colón's *Will* are two of the most extraordinary texts in the history of libraries in the early modern age.<sup>9</sup> Together, they constitute a handbook of librarianship that precedes other manuals in the field, such as Justus Lipsius' *De bibliothecis syntagma* (1602) and Gabriel Naudé's formidable *Avis pour dresser une bibliothèque* (1627).<sup>10</sup> The authors provide excellent translations of these two documents, and they also include a useful table of the 'biblioglyphs' created by Colón to describe and record his volumes. These complex symbols are transcribed within the translation of Perez's *Memoria*, to offer readers a more comprehensive view of this precious testimony. The other three sources included in the appendix also provide perspective on Colón's cartographic interests and organizational skills. This section contains the *Proposal to King Ferdinand, for a Voyage around the World* (p. 238–242), and the brief *Appointment as the Coordinator for the Elaboration of a New Version of the Padrón Real* (p. 243–244). But it also includes the important petition *Memorial al Emperador* (p. 245–248) – never sent – in which Colón asked Charles V to transform his annual pension of 500 gold pesos into a perpetual grant for the development of his library.

Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee's study has many merits. Thanks to their unique ability to analyze the Renaissance material world and written culture, the authors have created a highly useful and understandable guide for navigating the complex knowledge organization projects devised by Hernando Colón. Furthermore, the book offers numerous insights into the character of this underestimated intellectual figure of the early modern age. The authors' analysis of the connections between the

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<sup>8</sup> HENRY HARRISSE, *Grandeur et décadence de la Colombine*, Chez tous les marchands de nouveautés [Macon, Imprimerie Protat frères], Paris 1885.

<sup>9</sup> The critical edition of the *Memoria* is TOMÁS MARÍN MARTÍNEZ, '*Memorias de las obras y libros de Hernando Colón del Bachiller Juan Pérez*', CSIC, Seville 1970. The digital reproduction of Colón's will is available at: [https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/cultura/archivos/web\\_es/contenido?id=d3149aa8-be0b-11e7-9569-000ae4865a5f&idActivo=&idContArch=209cf194-8f0d-11e3-9865-000ae4865a5f](https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/cultura/archivos/web_es/contenido?id=d3149aa8-be0b-11e7-9569-000ae4865a5f&idActivo=&idContArch=209cf194-8f0d-11e3-9865-000ae4865a5f) (accessed March 2022).

<sup>10</sup> On Lipsius's treatise, see THOMAS HENDRICKSON, *Ancient Libraries and Renaissance Humanism. The De bibliothecis of Justus Lipsius*, Brill, Leiden 2017, and ENRICO PIO ARDOLINO, *Storiografia delle biblioteche: genesi, stabilità e fratture di una tradizione di studi*, Metauro, Pesaro 2020, p. 58–64. The most recent edition of Naudé's work is GABRIEL NAUDÉ, *Avis pour dresser une bibliothèque*, edited with an Introduction and Notes by BERNARD TEYSSANDIER, Klincksieck, Paris 2008.

production and research of information in the Renaissance mercantile world, and the methodology of collection, storage, and dissemination of information conceived by Colón for his projects is excellent. Equally significant is the emphasis that Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee give to the documentary value of the *obrezillas* (ephemera) collected by Colón. The study of the popular literary production and of the reception of ephemeral typographic products such as calendars, almanacs, and other pamphlets, has experienced a renewed success in recent years; this is thanks mainly to the rise of the new Global Medieval and Renaissance Studies, devoted to the cultural dimension of the less educated social classes and non-specialist readers. The authors powerfully emphasize how the collection and recording of these publishing products represents one of the most important outcomes of Colón's project. Rejected by humanist bibliographers because they were not considered worthy of historical attention, as products of an 'inferior' culture and society, these small books were for Colón the most precious to collect and preserve. Their importance lies precisely in their fragility and in the rapidity of use of this material by the European public. Colón's 'mission' was to preserve all written evidence of human knowledge. Consequently, these small and fragile objects, which risked disappearing more easily than the ponderous tomes of theology or philosophy, cherished by the members of the emerging republic of letters, were for Colón the most prized and sought-after. Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee fully capture this crucial aspect of Colón's project, pointing out that the volumes he collected often constitute today the only surviving evidence of texts from popular European Renaissance literature (p. 88). Unfortunately, once the dream of the universal library was over, these small books became targets of the nineteenth-century depredations of the Biblioteca Colombina, resulting in a diaspora of ephemera, from Spain, across Europe, to the American library collections (p. 172–173). Building upon the many ideas that arise while reading Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee's masterful book, in the following pages I offer some considerations about the origin of Colón's bibliographic projects, and the material reconstruction of the universal library.

## II. *A Giant with Feet of Clay*

It is no mystery that today, as in the early modern age, to build a library one must meet certain basic requirements, including an excellent knowledge of the book market; a physical space to accommodate the volumes; a solid organizational plan; and, most importantly, the financial wherewithal. In the case of Colón, who strove for a potentially limitless library, to preserve the knowledge and memory of humankind, these requirements would certainly have to be increased tenfold. In thirty years of

uninterrupted research, Colón managed to collect, catalog, and organize over 15.000 volumes, including printed editions, manuscripts, and prints; the size of the 'Biblioteca Hernandina' at his death (1539) was unrivaled in Europe. As Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee suggest, in chapter 1 of their book, Colón likely began to systematically collect volumes after 1509. According to the inventory of his possessions, drawn up that same year, the young Hernando owned 'only' 238 titles, a number that, as the authors point out, did not require a precise cataloging organization to be managed:

It was probably the case that, with only 238 titles, Hernando could remember each volume clearly, meaning that it was not yet necessary to conceive of a firmly separate class of 'books,' a notion that (counterintuitively) only emerges when there are so many books that they need to be set aside, divided, and organized as a class in order not to become unmanageable.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, up to that time, Colón's collection was what Victor Infantes referred to as a « patrimonial library ».<sup>12</sup> In this kind of library, usually consisting of less than 300 items, the book is considered a luxury, and is closely associated with other assets possessed (or inherited) by the owner. Though not entirely independent from the owner's estate, this kind of collection is, as Manuel Pedraza Gracia has pointed out, based on the owner's intellectual interests, and therefore allows insight into their intentions.<sup>13</sup> Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee indicate that until at least 1511 – the year in which he proposed the circumnavigation of the globe to King Ferdinand – Colón acquired books exclusively for his own personal use (p. 27). The young Hernando's collection was not yet the library that he would assemble a few years later, but many elements of this 'patrimonial' version hint at how it would develop. In particular, his habit of recording information about the price and location (and later the date) of purchases testifies to the fact that Colón had already intended to substantially grow his library. Colón's journey to Rome in 1512 drastically changed his view of the book world.

His stay in the Eternal City, from 1512 to 1516, allowed Colón to exponentially expand his knowledge in the humanities and science by taking courses at the city's

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<sup>11</sup> PERÉZ FERNÁNDEZ – WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> VÍCTOR INFANTES, « Las ausencias en los inventarios de libros y de bibliotecas », *Bulletin hispanique*, 99 (1997), p. 281–292, at p. 283.

<sup>13</sup> MANUEL JOSÉ PEDRAZA GRACIA, *El conocimiento organizado de un hombre de Trento. La biblioteca de Pedro del Frago, obispo de Huesca en 1584*, Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, Zaragoza 2011, p. 24



*studium*. But, above all, he came in contact with one of the most flourishing and diverse book markets in Europe. In Roman bookshops, he could find tomes for advancing his studies, and he probably visited some of the religious libraries throughout the city. And, although there is no proof, he almost certainly would have visited the great collection of the Palatine Library in the Vatican, one of the great monuments to the human intellect of the former *Caput mundi*.<sup>14</sup> As Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee suggest, Rome was not only the city that enhanced Colón's study of *humanae litterae*.<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Rome was a city of powerful social and cultural contrasts, and for Colón, it extended far beyond the noble palaces, the seat of the curial aristocracy, and the cultural centers of the university. In the shady slums of the city, nobles, merchants, scholars, plebeians, prostitutes, and people of ill repute mingled, as in a modern cosmopolitan center, where urban boundaries are not always well defined. It was therefore not uncommon for a wealthy 'tourist' like Colón to visit sections of the city that had little or nothing to do with his social status. As a matter of fact, during his four-year stay in Italy, the young Spaniard assiduously frequented the popular Roman suburbs. In those places, which were anything but safe, he probably began the real bibliographic revolution that would make the project of the universal library unique.

The streets of Rome, at the time of Pope Julius II, were teeming with storytellers, acrobats, peddlers, and itinerant printers. Among the goods on their stalls, and in their baskets, were simple printed works – sometimes of two or even of one single leaf of paper – which quickly circulated among the clientele. These were ephemeral publications: erotic poems, ballads, or 'barzelete', recited by street actors, prayers in rhyme, chivalric poems, almanacs, calendars, chronicles of recent events, etc. Buyers certainly read these works and, when done, often used them to wrap fish, balance the leg of a stool, or light a fire.<sup>16</sup> Thus upon his arrival in the Eternal City, Colón had to navigate an ocean of popular publications printed in Rome, Venice, and other Italian printing centers, which did not fail to entice him as an explorer. Many have wondered

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<sup>14</sup> On the history of the Vatican Library in the Renaissance, see *Storia della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana. I: Le origini della Biblioteca Vaticana tra umanesimo e Rinascimento (1447-1534)*, ed. ANTONIO MANFREDI, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2010. Particularly interesting are the essays by ANTONIO MANFREDI, « La nascita della Vaticana in età umanistica da Niccolò V a Sisto IV » (p. 147-236), and ANDREINA RITA, « Per la storia della Vaticana nel primo Rinascimento » (p. 237-307).

<sup>15</sup> PERÉZ FERNÁNDEZ – WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> In the vast academic literature on popular typographic production in Italy see: ROSA SALZBERG, *Ephemeral City: Cheap Print and Urban Culture in Renaissance Venice*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2014; GIANCARLO PETRELLA, *L'impresa tipografica di Battista Farfengo a Brescia. Fra cultura umanistica ed editoriale popolare (1489-1500)*, Leo S. Olschki, Florence 2018.

about the origin of Colón's spasmodic interest in the *obrezillas* of popular typographic culture that constituted the core of his bibliographic project. Unfortunately, there is still no definitive answer. Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee cleverly suggest a connection between Colón's interest in the popular genre of prognostications and his father's explorations:

The particular interest of these pamphlets for Hernando is perhaps most strikingly demonstrated by the *sammelband* that today bears the shelf mark 12-1-13, which brings together a series of eleven prognostications for the year 1492. The collection is, of course, wholly in keeping both with the millenarian readings of Columbus's voyage from within his immediate circle and beyond and with Hernando's interest in the resources of cheap print.<sup>17</sup>

To be sure, Christopher Columbus' reading and writing habits deeply influenced his son's intellectual formation. The millenarian perspective with which the explorer's writings were imbued, as the authors point out, made an immediate impression on the young Hernando.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the *Libro de las Profecías*, the collection of biblical quotations and classical texts composed by the explorer, to emphasize the providential nature of his maritime enterprises, seems to have had a powerful effect on Colón.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Hernando himself copied some sections of the *Libro*, in which he exalted the father figure and his mission decreed by heaven. However, Columbus' enterprise was not only the event that led the Spanish monarchy to dream of a millenarian and universal empire. It represented a pivotal moment in Columbus' personal history, an epoch-making achievement, the extraordinary (and tragic) consequences of which, political and economic, allowed him and the other members of his family (including the young Hernando) to lead a wealthy and privileged existence.

The 'discovery of the Indies', which would bring glory and prosperity to the Spanish monarchs, as well as to Columbus and his descendants, was exalted, and not only in the navigator's private writings. The whole of Europe became aware of this astonishing enterprise, and the surprising results, thanks to the circulation of the letter sent by Columbus to the Spanish court upon his return from his first voyage, in

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<sup>17</sup> PERÉZ FERNÁNDEZ, WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> PERÉZ FERNÁNDEZ, WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, p. 23–24.

<sup>19</sup> On the *Libro de las Profecías* see JUAN LUIS DE LEÓN AZCARATE, « El *Libro de las Profecías* (1504) de Cristóbal Colón: La Biblia y el descubrimiento de América », *Religión y Cultura*, 53 (2007), p. 361–406. The English translation of the *Libro* is *The Libro de la profecías of Christopher Columbus*, eds. DELNO C. WEST, AUGUST KLING, University of Florida Press, Gainesville 1991.

March 1493.<sup>20</sup> Immediately after his arrival in Spain, a printed edition of the document in Spanish was published in Barcelona by Pedro Posa's printing house.<sup>21</sup> It was a two-leaf folio of very modest quality, which appears to have been prepared very hastily, given the numerous typographical errors and the very approximate page layout.<sup>22</sup> Even today, it has not been possible to establish the print run of this pamphlet, which is preserved in a single copy at the New York Public Library.<sup>23</sup> However, this method of news dissemination was formidable. In a short time, thanks to the rapid circulation of these extremely manageable publications, the news of Columbus' 'discovery' reached Italy. The Latin translation of the letter was published in Rome in 1493 by one of the greatest printers of the city, Stephan Planck.<sup>24</sup> That same year, a second Roman edition was printed by Eucharius Silber, and a third one was published at the end of the year in Planck's workshop. And editions of the Latin translation were then printed in Paris, Antwerp, Basel, and Strasbourg.<sup>25</sup> Columbus' name, and the news of his feat, quickly spread throughout Europe. Translating a vernacular text into Latin meant making it accessible in socially and culturally elevated environments, such as

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<sup>20</sup> On Columbus' letter on the first voyage see: CARLOS SANZ LÓPEZ, *Bibliografía general de la Carta de Colón*, Librería General Victoriano Suárez, Madrid 1958; ID., *La Carta de Colón: 15 febrero-14 marzo 1493*, Gráficas Yagües, Madrid 1962.

<sup>21</sup> CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, *Epistola de su gran descubrimiento*, [Pedro Posa, Barcelona, after 4 March 1493], ISTC ic00756000.

<sup>22</sup> « Esta carta se imprimió tan rápidamente en Barcelona que, para ganar tiempo, ni se corrigió el molde, ni se justificaron las líneas, igualándolas exactamente, ni tampoco se incluyeron muchos de los blancos que eran necesarios para la debida separación de palabras. Tal es el cúmulo de erratas que contiene esta impresión, además de la mezcla de cuerpos, que parece incomprensible. Incluso la segunda plana tiene una línea más, que por añadidura volvió a componerse, pues se ajusta en la cabeza de la plana tercera lo que ya se decía en la última de la anterior ». DEMETRIO RAMOS PÉREZ, *La carta de Colón sobre el Descubrimiento*, Diputación provincial de Granada, Granada 1983, p. 34–35.

<sup>23</sup> New York (NY), New York Public Library, KB+ 1493. The digital reproduction of the letter is available at: <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/7fbc3989-f804-30a9-e040-e00a18067752/?uuid=7fbc3989-f805-30a9-e040-e00a18067752> (accessed March 2022). Another edition of Columbus' letter in Spanish was published in Valladolid in the printing shop of Pedro Giraldo and Miguel de Planes (ISTC ic00756500). Although we have not yet been able to establish an exact date for the edition, it appears that it is not a copy of the Barcelona publication, but instead is an independent edition based on the same manuscript as the Posa letter. The only copy of the Valladolid edition is preserved in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan (Inc. 2016). ROBERTO GALLOTTI, « Incunabolo Ambrosiano della lettera di Cristoforo Colombo », *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch*, 67 (1992), p. 72–82.

<sup>24</sup> CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, *Epistola de insulis nuper inventis*, [Stephan Planck, Rome, after 29 April 1493], ISTC ic00757000.

<sup>25</sup> On the early European reception of Columbus' letter, see the brief but detailed account *The Diffusion of Columbus's Letter through Europe, 1493-1497*: <https://oshermaps.org/special-map-exhibits/columbus-letter/iv-diffusion-columbus-letter-through-europe-1493-1497> (accessed March 2022).

courts, episcopates, and universities. But news like the discovery of ‘new lands’ beyond the sea could not fail to attract another type of audience, a popular audience, stingy with captivating news. Consequently, once again in Rome, in June of that vibrant 1493, Eucharius Silber printed a new version of a work he had published a short time before: a Tuscan translation in *ottava rima* verse of the letter, written by Giuliano Dati.<sup>26</sup>

This edition, which would be reprinted four more times in Florence, Brescia, and Venice, is known through a single surviving copy, preserved in Seville at the Biblioteca Colombina. The volume was purchased in Rome by Hernando Colón a few weeks after his arrival in the city, in October 1512.<sup>27</sup> Sometime later, Colón also purchased a copy of one of the first Roman editions of the letter’s Latin translation.<sup>28</sup> He must have been considerably surprised to find those objects at Roman stalls, which had already been circulating in the streets of Rome and Italy for almost twenty years. Those fragile pamphlets told the story that had changed the world, and with it his and his father’s lives. But the news of the greatest event of the last few centuries had not been transmitted through luxurious folio editions. Rather, it was conveyed through small books of meager quality, that passed from reader to reader with lightning speed. The copies Colón managed to purchase in Rome were two of the few of those editions of the letter’s Italian and Latin translations that had survived. Other copies and editions, printed more than fifteen years before, were no longer on the market, and one can only imagine what became of them. Only a good deal of luck would have made it possible to recover some copies of those (for him) precious *obrezillas*, but it does not seem that young Hernando was able to find any in the squares he frequented.

The loss of documents that transmitted the memory of one of the most important events in the history of the world, and in his personal life, perhaps played an important role in Colón’s bibliographic career. Pamphlets designed for rapid circulation and consumption contained news that changed the world. Stories of battles, sieges, missions, conciliations, etc. were conveyed by ephemeral objects made of paper and ink. The memory of those events, and that of the society interested in them, was constantly in danger of being erased because of the delicacy of the medium that transmitted them. If it was in Rome that Colón began to shape his project of a

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<sup>26</sup> GIULIANO DATI, *Lettera delle isole nuovamente trovate*, [Eucharius Silber], Rome, 15 June 1493, ISTC id00045890.

<sup>27</sup> Seville, Biblioteca Capitulare y Colombina, 6-3-24(11).

<sup>28</sup> *REgistrum B*, n. 3028. This copy of the letter is no longer on the shelves of the Biblioteca Colombina. Probably it was removed in the second half of the nineteenth century and placed on the Parisian antiquarian book market.

universal repository of human knowledge, inspired by a millenarian vision like that which had guided his father's 'mission', then he was also likely inspired by the desire to save and preserve the memory of the modern world: a heterogeneous and ever-changing world, whose complex social, economic, religious, political, and cultural elements coexisted in a fragile yet intricate harmony.

Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee state that in his later years, Colón had clearly defined his library as a « repertorio de los tiempos », whose cornerstones were the *obrezillas* containing the most disparate texts, from annual predictions to accounts of wars in Middle Eastern lands, to religious controversies, to technical manuals, and even popular ballads and chivalric novels.<sup>29</sup> This gigantic repository, as a permanent work in progress, was based on objects that were precarious in their physical structure, but extraordinarily precious as testimonies of living and vibrant contexts that, together, comprised the multicolored mosaic of European civilization of the time. In turn, this ongoing civilization, characterized by new geographical discoveries, scientific advancements, technological developments, intellectual and religious disparities, but also by superstitions, fears, and violence, was able to be sustained and developed through channels of communication which, thanks to the new technique of printing, quickly connected the great urban centers and beyond. Colón understood that the world was moving much faster than before. His mission as savior and guardian of universal human knowledge, which virtually connected him with Poggio Bracciolini and his mission to recover classical texts, took into account this change and the factors that made it possible.<sup>30</sup> He therefore decided to take a path never embarked upon before and abandoned the rules of traditional *bibliophilia*. The only way to understand, grasp, and preserve the essence of human knowledge was to search for, and safeguard, the means that conveyed it. The success of the Colón family was due to an *obrezilla* which, traversing the European continent, forever changed the fate of the world. The decision to collect fragile volumes, like Columbus' letter, and salvage their memory, meant following the salvific mission his father began with his geographical explorations. At the same time, building a universal repository of knowledge on ephemeral texts, and on fragile and perishable volumes, meant, in an almost

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<sup>29</sup> PERÉZ FERNÁNDEZ – WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, p. 96.

<sup>30</sup> Between 1415 and 1417 the humanist and papal secretary Poggio Bracciolini visited numerous German monasteries in search of manuscripts containing works of Latin literature. Among the many works he recovered there were also Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* and Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. Bracciolini narrated his many book hunts in his letters: POGGIO BRACCIOLINI, *Lettere*, Leo S. Olschki, Florence 1984–1987, *passim*. A complete list of the manuscripts recovered by Bracciolini is available in CLAUDIO PIGA and GIANCARLO ROSSI, « Introduzione », in POGGIO BRACCIOLINI, *L'avarizia*, Aragno, Turin 2015, p. v–lii.

Franciscan perspective of salvation, recognizing, for the first time in human history, the indispensable role of culture and popular society in the development and advancement of the modern world.

### III. *A Look to the Future: Some Perspectives of Investigation on the Universal Library*

The fragility and the easy circulation of the pamphlets, collected by Colón, were certainly aspects that outlined the extraordinary nature of the universal library. But they were also the same factors that condemned them. As mentioned before, Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee have masterfully underlined how, after Colón's death, there was a period of theft and robbery, spanning more than three hundred years. After the cessation of the library in 1557 to the Chapter of the Cathedral of Seville by Colón's heir, Don Luis, the books were absorbed into the collection of the religious institution, thus losing their identity as a repository of universal knowledge. Yet unlike many libraries of religious orders of the early modern age, the Library of the Chapter did not have set rules for the use and development of the bibliographic collection.<sup>31</sup> This lack of organization (one of Colón's nightmares) proved fatal to the survival of the ancient hernandine collection. As early as 1678, just 120 years after the transition to the Chapter, two-thirds of the books once belonging to Colón had been removed or stolen, after years of unsupervised use by local readers.<sup>32</sup>

Many of the volumes stolen from the Chapter, between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, arrived in the libraries of Spanish religious orders, and often within the city of Seville. This is the case, for example, of Lucian of Samosata's *Dialogi*, today owned by the University Library of Seville.<sup>33</sup> In the second half of the sixteenth century, this volume was acquired, perhaps through a donation, by the professed house of the Jesuits of Seville and remained in that collection until 1767, when the Spanish Crown decreed the dissolution of the Society of Jesus in its territories. On other occasions, Colón's books entered the collections of religious institutes throughout the Iberian Peninsula, far from their place of origin. For instance, in the

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<sup>31</sup> In this context, the case of the Society of Jesus is emblematic. Its library rules, originally borrowed from the Sorbonne's library system, were refined over the course of forty years of library experimentation to safeguard the bibliographic patrimony of the colleges from dispersion and improper use of the volumes. On the history of the early modern Jesuit libraries see NATALE VACALEBRE, *Come le armature e l'armi. Per una storia delle antiche biblioteche della Compagnia di Gesù. Con il caso di Perugia*, Leo S. Olschki, Florence 2016.

<sup>32</sup> PÉREZ FERNÁNDEZ, WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, p. 186.

<sup>33</sup> LUCIANUS SAMOSATENSIS, *Deorum dialogi*, ed. OTTMAR NACHTGALL, Ioannes Schottus, Strassbourg 1515 (Seville University Library, A Res. 10/5/15).

first half of the seventeenth century, a *sammelband* from the former 'Biblioteca Hernandina', containing several pamphlets dedicated to the *Passio Domini*, became part of the patrimony of the monastery of the Sacro Monte of Granada.<sup>34</sup> Before arriving at the monastery, this volume was likely part of the collection of the archbishop of Granada, Pedro de Castro, who donated his library to Sacro Monte upon his death in 1623.<sup>35</sup>

However, as Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee point out, the most noteworthy case of book theft occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, when approximately four hundred volumes of the Biblioteca Colombina were stolen and placed on the antiquarian book market in Paris. The scandal was immediately denounced by the scholar Henry Harrisse in a famous 1885 pamphlet, wherein he listed titles from the hernandine collection, that he had been able to view, now available for sale in the French capital.<sup>36</sup> News of the theft quickly reached Spain, but elicited very little reaction. The echo was not, however, limited to Europe. In a fiery *New York Times* article of August 1885, entitled « Vandals in a Library », an anonymous correspondent from Paris, summarizing the contents of Harrisse's pamphlet, described the scandalous theft, cited some of the titles listed in Harrisse's work, and emphasized their extraordinary historical and bibliographic value.<sup>37</sup> Despite the condemnation (indeed, perhaps because of it) the stolen volumes continued to circulate on the international book market and soon arrived in the hands of private Italian, British, and American collectors. As one can easily guess, these books were primarily *obrezillas* that could be easily removed, unbound, and sent clandestinely in crates as packaging for other valuable goods. As also suggested by Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee's, the international circulation of these volumes can be partially traceable through the analysis of numerous European antiquarian booksellers catalogs, as well as auction catalogs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>38</sup> The study of these materials, together with the new digital tools and the

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<sup>34</sup> Granada, Library of the Monastery of the Sacro Monte (no shelfmark). On this *sammelband*, see MARÍA LUISA GARCÍA VALVERDE, « Libros de Hernando Colón en Granada: incunables y post-incunables en la Abadía del Sacro Monte », *Revista del CEHGR*, 23 (2011), p. 87-105.

<sup>35</sup> GARCÍA VALVERDE, « Libros de Hernando Colón en Granada: incunables y post-incunables en la Abadía del Sacro Monte », p. 93.

<sup>36</sup> HARRISSE, *Grandeur et décadence de la Colombine*, *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> « Vandals in a Library », *The New York Times*, Sunday, August 30, 1885, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> The authors list in particular some volumes of the Biblioteca Colombina, today preserved at the Cini Foundation in Venice, which arrived at the Italian library through the Essling collection deposited in Venice at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as through the sale of some pamphlets by

progress in the field of antique book cataloguing, make it possible today to track many of the volumes of the old hernandine collection, scattered across libraries throughout the world. Moreover, the rarity and uniqueness of many of the pamphlets collected by Colón make it somewhat easier to locate these precious materials in international repositories. Additionally, by cross-referencing the information contained in Colón's catalogues for his universal library, with the data provided by HARRISSE in his books dedicated to the volumes stolen from Seville, and the information in early twentieth century antiquarian catalogs, it is possible to compile a list of the hernandine book collection dispersed in the nineteenth century. It is also therefore possible to trace the journeys of these books, changes in ownership, and possibly reconstruct an important section of the heritage of the universal library. Below I offer some exemplary cases of 'recovery' of items from Colón's collection, now housed at some European and American libraries, I was able to locate by cross-referencing information gathered from the aforementioned materials.<sup>39</sup>

In one of HARRISSE's volumes, entitled *Excerpta Colombiniana*, the scholar published the titles of works stolen from Seville, which he considered particularly precious. One of the most intriguing volumes was a sammelband containing seven illustrated pamphlets of popular devotion.<sup>40</sup> Contrary to what happened to many of Colón's pamphlets stolen in the nineteenth century, this sammelband was not disbound and was sold intact in Paris in 1885. The volume later entered the library of the painter-collector Charles Fairfax Murray, which was then auctioned in London by Christie, Mason & Woods, between 1917-1918.<sup>41</sup> The auction catalog individually records all the

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the Italian antiquarian bookseller Tamaro de Marinis. PERÉZ FERNÁNDEZ, WILSON-LEE, *Hernando Colón's New World of Books*, p. 284-285, n. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Even today some volumes of Colón's lost collection can be found for sale on the international antiquarian book market. For instance, the French antiquarian bookseller Jean-François Letenneur has in its catalog a copy of the *Image du monde* (Paris, Alain Lotrian, c. 1520-1530) once housed in the Biblioteca Colombina. On the first guard leaf it displays the ex-libris of the Colombina and a handwritten inscription of Baron Jérôme Pichon that reads: « exemplaire de Fernand Colomb mort en 1539, fils de Christophe Colomb. Acheté en 1885. hez. Edition non citée ». <https://www.jfletenneur.livresrares.fr/rechercher?q=Image%20du%20Monde&node=1> (accessed March 2022). At the moment, I am working on a methodological article devoted to locating part of the volumes removed from the Colombina and placed on the international antiquarian book market between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

<sup>40</sup> HENRY HARRISSE, *Excerpta Colombiniana. Bibliographie de quatre cents pièces gothiques, françaises, italiennes, & latines du commencement du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle non décrites jusqu'ici; précédée d'une histoire de la Bibliothèque Colombine et de son fondateur*, H. Welter, Paris 1887, n. 267, 298, 320, 358, 373, 381, 424.

<sup>41</sup> *Catalogue of the library of C. Fairfax Murray, esq. sold by auction by Messrs. Christie, Manson & Woods* [W. Clowes and Sons, Ltd., London 1917].



texts on HARRISSE's list, which were purchased by the Italian antiquarian bookseller Tammaro De Marinis. In 1925, all the items in the Libreria De Marinis were sold at auction, and a catalog of the entire collection was prepared for the occasion. The *sammelband* was generically described as « *Miscellanea di opuscoli dei secoli XV e XVI* ». <sup>42</sup> It was sold to Prince Luigi Trivulzio, descendant of one of the most ancient families of Milanese book collectors, whose extraordinary library was later donated to the city of Milan, giving rise to today's Biblioteca Trivulziana. Like all the volumes of the Trivulzio library, the *sammelband* became part of the civic library, where it is still kept today. <sup>43</sup>

Although not included in the repertories compiled by HARRISSE, other works, removed from the Colombina in the nineteenth century, arrived in the libraries of collectors and institutions overseas. Let us take the case of two pamphlets, once bound in a single volume, described in detail in two catalogs of the antiquarian bookseller Giuseppe Martini. These are the anonymous *Assedio di Caffa* and the *Ricette contro la peste* by the physician Antonio Cermisone. <sup>44</sup> In both catalogs, Martini reconstructs the changes in ownership and provides the full history of these works following their removal from the Seville library. <sup>45</sup> The *sammelband* was purchased in Paris by the French architect Hyppolite Destailleur and, upon his death, was sold to the English collector Sydney Richardson Christie-Miller. <sup>46</sup> The collection established by the latter, at Britwell Court, was sold at auction in 1917 and the volume was sold to the antiquarian bookseller Bernard Quaritch. <sup>47</sup> Some years later it passed into Martini's hands; all the bookseller's volumes were auctioned in 1935 once the Libreria Martini

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<sup>42</sup> *Vendita all'asta della preziosa collezione proveniente dalla cessata Libreria De Marinis, 30 novembre - 3 dicembre 1925*, vol. II, Hoepli, Milan 1925, n. 275. De Marinis' catalog (vol. III, n. 214) lists another volume from the Colombina, a copy of the poem *Buovo d'Antona* (Benedetto Bindoni, Venice, 1537), Edit16 CNCE 80435.

<sup>43</sup> Milan, Biblioteca Trivulziana, Triv. Inc. E 21. The volume contains all the seven works listed by HARRISSE and in the flyleaf of the binding is glued the ex-libris of the Biblioteca Colombina.

<sup>44</sup> *L'assedio e la presa di Caffa*, [Albrecht Kunne, Trent, after 7 June 1475], ISTC ic00032000; Antonio Cermisone, *Ricette contro la pestilenza* [Christophorus Valdarfer, Milan, about 1483-84], ISTC ic00405000.

<sup>45</sup> *Catalogo della libreria di Giuseppe Martini, compilato dal possessore da servire come saggio per una nuova bibliografia di storia e letteratura italiana*, Hoepli, Milan 1934, n. 18, 129; *Bibliothèque Joseph Martini, deuxième partie*, Hoepli, Milan 1935, n. 14, 62.

<sup>46</sup> *Catalogue de livres rares et précieux composant la bibliothèque de M. Hippolyte Destailleur*, Morgand, Paris 1891, n. 802.

<sup>47</sup> *Catalogue of the renowned library formerly at Britwell Court, Burnham, Bucks, the property of S.R. Christie-Miller*, vol. II: *Books and tracts of the 15th and early 16th centuries. The property of a gentleman*, [Sotheby, London 1917], n. 306.

ceased activity. On that occasion, the sammelband was disbound and the two pamphlets were sold separately to two different American libraries. Today, the copy of the *Assedio* is located at the Morgan Library in New York,<sup>48</sup> while the volume of *Ricette* is housed at the Countway Medicine Library at Harvard University.<sup>49</sup>

Many other cases of Colón's missing books could be reconstructed, but this is not the place for such an undertaking. What is certain is that a project aimed at locating and recovering such a patrimony is highly desirable. Reconstructing the itineraries of Colón's volumes, after their passage through the chapter library, and through the nineteenth century, is not merely exercise in bibliographic archaeology. Locating Colón's dispersed volumes also means recovering his purchase notes, reading annotations, and ownership records, as well as the provenance records of subsequent owners. These elements are crucial for reconstructing the origin and evolution of Colón's revolutionary enterprise, and the mobility patterns of printed books between the early modern age and today. The hope is that, with the renewed interest in Colón's adventures, new projects dedicated to the multifaceted journey of this extraordinary figure of the European Renaissance can take shape and shed new light on the transformations of the world in the early modern period.<sup>50</sup> As Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee suggest, there are many unexplored areas of Colón's projects. The very adventure of the universal library has many aspects that await further investigation: What was the direct relationship between Colón and European booksellers and printers? How did his agents obtain bibliographic information at European book markets? Were the catalogs of booksellers and publishers tools that had to be collected and stored in the library? How did Colón's reading habits influence the creation of a sophisticated bibliographic/narrative tool such as the *Libro de los epítomes*? And who were the library's users when Colón was alive? These and other questions about the history of Colón's most crucial project are accompanied by others about his still unexplored intellectual undertakings. His myriad interests took the form of several fascinating endeavors: dictionaries, maps, poetic texts, and, above all, an extraordinary botanical garden that, like the library it flanked, endeavored to collect

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<sup>48</sup> New York (NY), Morgan Library and Museum, INCUN ChL1713A.

<sup>49</sup> Cambridge (MA), Harvard University, Countway Library of Medicine, Ballard 263. The digital reproduction of the book is available at: [https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:7334141\\$1i](https://iif.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:7334141$1i) (accessed March 2022).

<sup>50</sup> At the moment, there is an ongoing project at the University of Copenhagen dedicated to the *Libro de los epítomes*. The project's chief deliverable will be the online database *Book of Books*, containing information on the books listed in the *Libro de los epítomes*, and a six-volume commented edition of the *Libro* with English translation and explanatory notes: <https://nors.ku.dk/english/research/arna-magnaeen/the-book-of-books/> (accessed March 2022).

the universality of the plant world. Each of these ambitious projects is waiting to be further examined and included in the new field of Hernandine Studies, of which Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee's volume is, without a doubt, a masterful forerunner.