

## A Behind-the-Scenes Glimpse into the *Princeps* Edition of *Colóquios dos simples* (Goa, 1563)

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### Abstract

Considered by many to be the most learned Portuguese physician who lived in Goa during the sixteenth century, Garcia de Orta (c. 1500–1568) was the author of *Colóquios dos Simples, e Drogas he cousas medicinais da India* [Colloquies on the Simples and Drugs of India] (Goa, 1563). Devoted entirely to the description of Asian natural resources, very little is known about how this treatise came into existence. Published at the edges of the Portuguese empire, and a hostage to technical, structural and human constraints, the *princeps* edition had a limited circulation. The diffusion around Europe of the novelties described in *Colóquios dos Simples* owed in part to the efforts of Clusius (1526–1609), one of the leading botanists of the time. This scholar promptly published *Aromatum et Simplicium* (Antwerp, 1567), a Latin epitome of *Colóquios dos Simples*. This complete reframing of Orta's treatise guaranteed the wide dissemination of the new knowledge about Asian plants, fruits and drugs validated by the Portuguese physician on the periphery of the empire.

In this essay I analyse the background to the publication of the Portuguese treatise and demonstrate that, especially due to structural constraints, the *princeps* edition had a limited circulation. I show that the wide diffusion of the novelties about the natural resources of the Indies was dependent on the technical equipment, artistic skills and editorial criteria dictated and managed by European academics, artists and printers. I propose that the appropriation of local knowledge collected and validated in the

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Iberian Empires by imperial agents challenged European academics and typographers to create innovative treatises about the Indies' natural resources that assured the widespread circulation of an entirely new natural knowledge.

## Keywords

Garcia de Orta – *Colóquios dos Simples* – colonial typography – knowledge circulation – João de Endem

## The Question

Over the last few decades, “Iberian Science” has increasingly been a subject of interest to historians. Recent studies have demonstrated that the scientific and technological developments that occurred in the Iberian empires had a significant impact on European science. The meeting of the peninsular seafarers with the Indies had multiple consequences. The need to understand the potential of these “new worlds” led to the adoption of new methods for prospecting and describing natural resources. In order to address these new challenges, more appropriate methodologies were introduced for the interviewing of witnesses, the gathering of specimens, the depiction of “exotic” species and the testing and validation of local knowledge. It became imperative to create institutions capable of overseeing the management and circulation of an enormous mass of information.<sup>1</sup> Collected, tested and validated in the Indies, a new

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1 For an analysis of the impact of Iberian Science on the rise of modern science, see, among others, Antonio Barrera, *Experiencing Nature. The Spanish American Empire and the Early Scientific Revolution* (Austin, 2006), 29–100; Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in Iberian World* (Stanford, 2006), 14–45; Palmira Fontes da Costa and Henrique Leitão, “Portuguese Imperial Science, 1450–1800: A Historiographical Review,” in Daniela Bleichmar; Paula de Vos; Kristin Huffine and Kevin Sheehan, eds., *Science in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires, 1500–1800* (Stanford, 2009), 35–53. Henrique Leitão, “Epílogo: O Momento da Ciência Ibérica?,” in H. Leitão, ed., *360º Ciência Descoberta* (Lisbon, 2013), 92–99; Londa Schiebinger, “Prospecting for Drugs: European Naturalists in the West Indies,” in L. Schiebinger and Claudia Swan eds., *Colonial Botany. Science, Commerce and Politics in Early Modern Europe* (Pennsylvania, 2007), 119–133; José Pardo-Tomás and María Luz López Terrada, *Las primeras noticias sobre plantas americanas en las relaciones de viajes y crónicas de Indias (1493–1553)* (Valencia, 1993), 1–367. On the participation of Iberian agents in the construction of new practical knowledge, see A. Barrera, “Knowledge and Empiricism in the Sixteenth-Century Atlantic world,” in Bleichmar et al., eds.,