

***Hernando Colón's New World of Books
Toward a Cartography of Knowledge***

José María Pérez Fernández, Edward Wilson-Lee
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Hernan Colon (1488–1539), illegitimate son of Columbus, accompanied him on the fourth voyage of exploration to the New World (1502–04) and wrote an important and controversial biography of his father, published in Italian in Venice in 1571. A member of the court since childhood, in 1511 he put forward to Ferdinand the Catholic a plan for the circumnavigation of the globe, which was rejected at the time, but later carried out by Magellan (1519–22). Starting in 1518 Hernan worked with the Casa de Contratacion in Seville, the powerful body that managed trade with the Americas and the in-flow of resources vital to the monarchy of Spain; eight years later he was appointed head of the team in charge of drafting new and more accurate navigation maps and responsible for training the pilots of the fleet. Hernan's name, however, is mainly linked to the immense library (the Colombina or Ferdinandina) that he started to build in Seville in 1526, an institution which came to count about 15,000 titles and which was largely dispersed after his death. Hernan's life-long fascination with books had been bolstered up by the volumes inherited from his father and the titles he collected during his stay in Rome in 1512–16, where he came into contact with the Capitoline humanists, the Studium Urbis and the dense network of local booksellers. The Biblioteca Colombina reflected an all-encompassing, utopian desire to provide its readers with a well-ordered, accessible collection of 'all the books in all languages and disciplines that can be found within Christendom and beyond' (2). Mindful of the great collections of antiquity and their myth (Alexandria) and well-aware of the libraries which the humanists had developed in the fifteenth century (including the Vatican Library), the Colombina nevertheless set itself apart from them, as it never aimed to propose an authoritative, closed canon of classical texts, but a universal trove of knowledge constantly growing through the new acquisitions offered by an expanding print market. The new library was planned to serve the advancement of learning, preserve collective memory and encourage the ends of imperial Spanish power in Europe and the world as well as the aims of Christian evangelisation overseas. Hernan Colon thereby rekindled the strain of late medieval millenarianism which marked his father's travel experience and emerged in his *Libro de las profecias*. The

Colombina operated as a living body, open to the flow of information from the changing reality of a context of early-modern religious and political strife. A private institution, primarily supported by its master, the library was built up on a bend of the River Guadalquivir at Hernan's Casa de Goles, and boasted a botanical garden with plants from all over the world. Patterned after the humanist ideal of a comfortable, secluded villa for scholarly retreat and worldly conversation, the mansion hosted learned visitors, cartographers and natural philosophers and emerged as a leading venue for scholarly pursuit in Seville. The library was open to external readers, even though strict rules only made access to the books possible through staff, who were themselves involved in sorting out and filing its content through massive indexing and cataloguing projects. This effort to order knowledge made the Colombina an 'epicenter of early modernity' (13).

Colon nourished his life-long passion for books through acquisitions from the leading printing centres in Europe; but the core of his purchases came together during his two journeys in the retinue of Charles V: in 1520–22 he followed the ruler to his imperial coronation in Aachen and then descended from the Netherlands along the 'fertile crescent' of the Rhine, Switzerland, northern Italy and Venice, where he spent eight months. On his way back, the tour ended with a short spell in London. Later, in 1529–31, Hernan followed a similar path in the opposite direction, moving from Spain and northern Italy to the Low Countries. A section of the wealth of books acquired during the first trip (1,367 out of 4,300 volumes) was lost at sea during a shipment from Venice under the care of a Genoese merchant. Colon tried to replace them and to this end compiled an index of the lost works, the *Memorial de los libros naufragados*: the huge inventory prompted an innovative classification system for the collection, which would in the end number 39 manuscript volumes, divided into 16 large registers. A general key to accessing the library, these *repertorios* were presented by Juan Perez, a loyal collaborator of Hernan Colon, after his master's death (Appendix One, 200–26). From early on, Colon also carefully recorded the date and place of his purchases as well as the price paid and the corresponding value in Spanish *maravedis* to the local currency. What set the Colombina apart from other libraries, however, was the bulk of ephemera that its master acquired, and which made up 'the core of his universal library' (223). These pamphlets, or *obrezillas*, formed a heterogeneous set of cheap texts composed of newssheets, broadsides, lives of saints, devotional literature, calendars and fables as well as ballads and erotic poetry, which mirrored the events of the time – the Italian Wars, the Turkish threat and the idea of the Crusade, the role of the Holy See and its enemies. Many of the pamphlets reflected a millenarian perspective: as was the case of the 260 astrological prognostications that single out the library as the 'greatest known repository of public astronomy of the early modern age' (123). This exceptional patrimony remains a gold mine for scholars, who can find there some unique examples of a now lost printed production. As Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee make clear, these popular texts crossed the boundaries between different social groups and sowed the seeds for a possible public opinion which Colon and his collection intended to acknowledge, but also to control. A similar comprehensive logic

guided the acquisitions of typographical images that made the Colombina ‘the largest collection of printed images in Europe’ (59), none of which survives today. References to this material were nonetheless included in the three in-quarto volumes of the *Memoria de los Dibujos o Pintura*. The catalogue was meant to prevent the acquisition of duplicates, following the same commitment pursued by Colon and his librarians for books too.

Time and human neglect have deeply affected the Colombian legacy. The Inquisition heavily expurgated many titles, beginning with the copy of Erasmus’ *Antibarbari* that the founder had personally received from the author. The Arabic and Hebrew books that the patron’s encyclopaedic curiosity had put together have also disappeared. And not much remains of the religious controversies triggered by the Reformation, sedulously sought after in the early stages of the library. Pérez Fernández and Wilson-Lee’s analysis, however, goes farther than the textual content of the collection and concentrates on its genesis in accordance with their research project to highlight the unity of the library before and above the disciplinary boundaries of current science and bibliography. As such, the Colombina stands out as a path-breaking attempt to represent the variety of life through a system of linguistic and numerical symbols, flexible enough to accommodate the empirical evidence from an evolving global reality. The manifold activities of its founder interacted with the ordering of books as suggested by his personal experience of navigation, the role played by cosmographers and cartographers at the Casa de Contratacion and his commitment between 1518 and 1523 to create a general cartography of Spain. Colon’s intellectual prowess is equally attested by an incomplete Latin vocabulary in-folio as well as the extensive records and comments he made on his texts in the splendid *Libro de los Epitomes*, the fair copy of which was discovered in Copenhagen in 2019 and remains a prized source for specialists. The order of the books and world in the library paralleled the drive for new charts for navigation, trade and conquest. In the same way, it contributed to fixing the authority of editions and texts following strategies which bibliographers would later improve. A trailblazing collector in many fields, Colon maintained close ties with merchant networks (especially Genoese), and their accounting strategies helped to mould the symbolic order of the Colombina. Hence, merchants and bankers allowed their client to mirror the mobility of his experience in a single location/situation: the Colombina library