
NOTAS DE INVESTIGACIÓN / RESEARCH NOTES

**AN HANDWRITTEN SIGNATURE, PREVIOUS OWNERS AND CIRCULATION
OF A COPY OF GONZALO FERNÁNDEZ DE OVIEDO'S BOOK
"ABOUT THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE INDIES"**

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ABSTRACT: This research note aims to disclose a copy of Oviedo's *About the natural history of the Indies*, also known as *Summary of the natural history*, published in Toledo in 1526 and currently under the custody of Municipal Library of Porto, Portugal. Special features of this copy are presented: author's handwritten signature and some ownership marks that allow us to identify previous owners, the connections between them and to track book circulation.

KEY WORDS: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo; *About the Natural History of the Indies*, Handwritten Signature; Previous Owners; Book Circulation.

UNA FIRMA AUTÓGRAFA DE GONZALO FERNÁNDEZ DE OVIEDO, ANTIGUOS POSEEDORES Y CIRCULACIÓN DE UN EJEMPLAR "DE LA NATURAL HISTORIA DE LAS INDIAS"

RESUMEN: Esta nota de investigación tiene como objetivo revelar una copia de Oviedo *De la natural Historia de las Indias*, también conocida como *Sumario de historia natural*, publicada en Toledo en 1526 y actualmente bajo la custodia de la Biblioteca Municipal de Oporto, Portugal. Se presentan las características especiales de este ejemplar: una firma manuscrita del autor y algunas marcas de propiedad que nos permiten identificar a los anteriores dueños, las conexiones entre ellos y rutas de circulación del libro.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo; *De la natural Historia de las Indias*, Firma autógrafa; Antiguos poseedores; Circulación del libro.

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Almost everything has been written about the life, work and legacy of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478–1557). This is more than enough to not duplicate here his biography and works¹, even briefly. In that context and anchored in primary and secondary sources, this research note will focus on the following two specific topics.

AN UNKNOWN HANDWRITTEN SIGNATURE BY GONZALO FERNÁNDEZ DE OVIEDO (1478-1557)

In mid-2012, during partial work of raising old and rare scientific books in Municipal Library of Porto heritage collections, I came upon a copy² - shelfmark U-12-8 - of the work which began Oviedo's career as a chronicler of the West Indies. At the time I retained in memory the beautiful architectural frontispiece of *De la natural Historia de las Indias* and an elegant handwritten signature inside the roundel (Fig. 1); later, I have made several readings and research of which I give here a summary note³. I am now able to affirm that this copy has an unambiguous handwritten signature of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo. I compared this signature, which appears inside the heraldic medallion at the bottom of the title page, with another author's signature on an autograph manuscript preserved in the Royal Library of San Lorenzo of the Escorial (Fig. 2). In both documents the signatures are very similar⁴. Let's look at the evidence from these collated primary sources:

OVIEDO'S ABOUT THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE INDIES: PREVIOUS OWNERS AND BOOK CIRCULATION

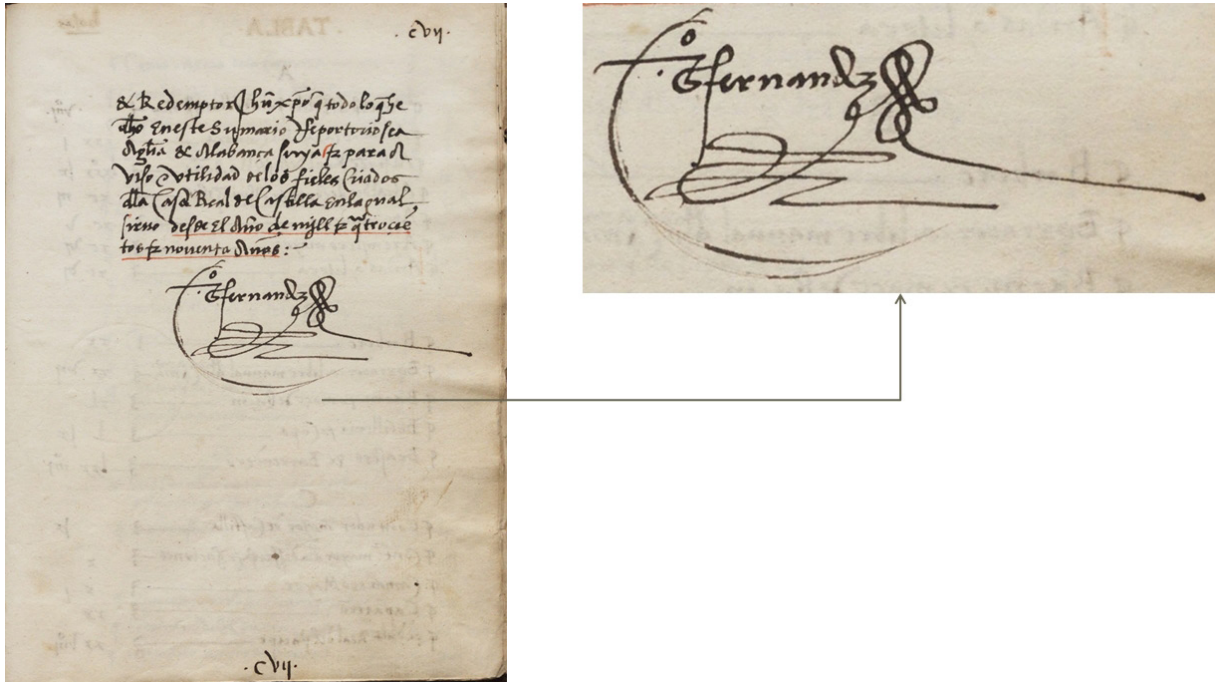
We do not know how this book signed by Oviedo ended into the hands of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), proprietary of one of the largest libraries in Europe of his time (Does the book travelled directly to Great Britain? Does it crossed France or other European countries?), but we know that Sloane owned two copies of Oviedo's *De la natural Historia de las Indias* (Toledo, 1526). Both copies - BPMP U-12-8 and BL C.63.k.7.(1.) - have inscribed alphanumeric marks, the most common form used by Sloane to number and categorize his books, but only one of them (shelfmark BPMP) bears Oviedo's handwritten signature. This copy here under analysis has Sloane number A 583 (Fig. 3). It should be noted that another work by Oviedo, a French edition of *L'histoire Naturelle Et Generale Des Indes...* (Paris, 1556), currently in the British Library (BL 601.m.15.), is probably from Sloane's collection⁵.

After Sloane's dead his collection of books (including those above mentioned) and manuscripts formed one of the foundation collections of the British Museum Library, later British Library. In this context, the printed titles were stamped with the distinctive British Museum ownership mark, the octagonal 'Museum Britannicum' black stamp. The British Museum held several sales of duplicate items. Our *Summary's* copy was registered as duplicate and stamped 'British Museum Sale Duplicate 1787' (Fig. 3).

Fig. 1. Detail of handwritten signature of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo on title-page of *De la natural Historia de las Indias*, Toledo, Ramón de Petras, 1526. Municipal Library of Porto, U-12-8.



Fig. 2. Detail of handwritten signature of Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo on folio 107 of *Libro de la Cámara Real del príncipe don Juan e offiçios de su casa e serviçio ordinario*. Año 1548. Autograph manuscript. Royal Library of San Lorenzo of the Escorial, Ms. e-IV-8.



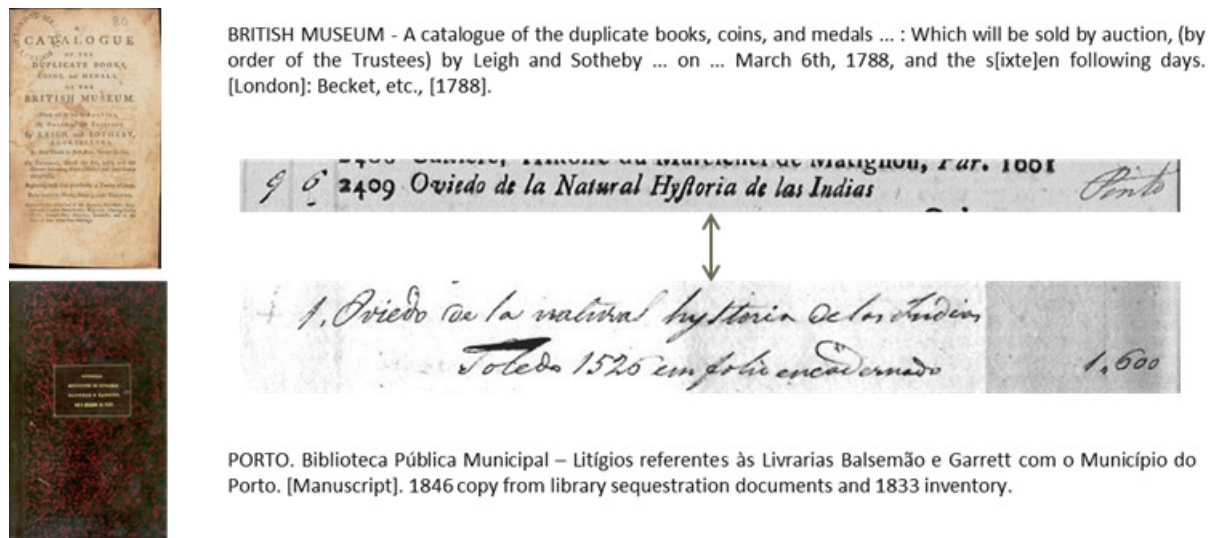
The auction, promoted by Leigh and Sotheby, took place in March 1788 and the book was bought by "Pinto", i.e., Luís Pinto de Sousa Coutinho (1735-1804), Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary from Portugal in London, later 1st Viscount of Balsemão⁶. This bibliophile returned to Portugal with the books which, after his death, were inherited by his son, Luís Máximo Alfredo Pinto de Sousa Coutinho (1774-1832), 2nd Viscount of Balsemão.

During the Portuguese Civil War, also known as Liberal Wars or War of the Two Brothers (1828-1834), the remarkable library of the Viscounts of Balsemão⁷, supporters of the absolutist party, was kidnapped by the victorious liberals, inventoried and incorporated (in a dispersed way) into the newly established (1833) Oporto Royal Public Library, nowadays Municipal Library of Porto, Portugal. Oviedo's *De la natural Historia de las Indias* reference in the auction catalog matches the one in the 'inventory' of Balsemão library (Fig. 4).

Fig. 3. Details of Sloane number, 'Duplicate' inscription (title-page) and British Museum stamps (title-page verso)



Fig. 4. Auction catalogue matching Library inventory

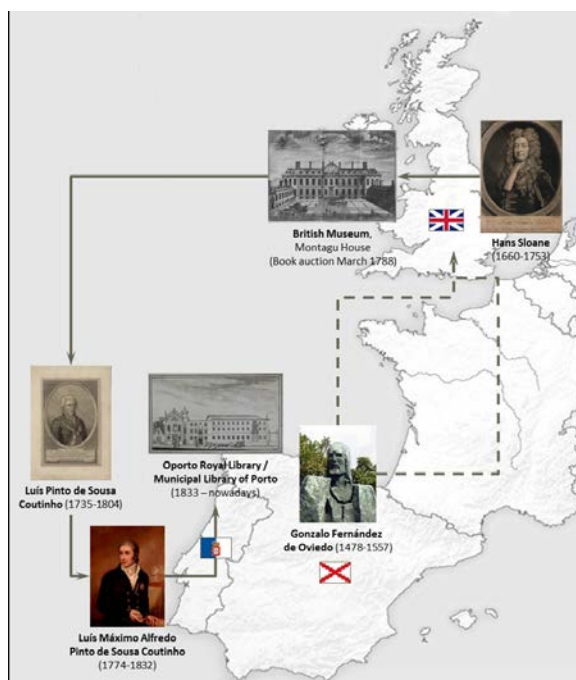


After circulating among aristocratic owners and travelling through private and public libraries, at least across three European countries – Spain, United Kingdom and Portugal – this copy of Oviedo’s *Summary*, an example of book circulation and knowledge transmission (Fig. 5), lies in the Municipal Library of Porto waiting to be rediscovered by researchers and readers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Fig. 5. Previous owners and book circulation



NOTES

1. The bibliography on Oviedo is, fortunately, very extensive. A selection of two dozen titles may be cited as an example – see Bibliography section below.
2. View BPMP catalog record - URI: <http://bibliotecas.cm-porto.pt/ipac20/ipac.jsp?&uri=full=3100024~!453462~!0>
3. Further to this now disclosed specimen, I have knowledge of a few copies of *Summary* presumably signed by the author (despite the differentiated signatures), e.g.: University of Virginia Library, Special Collections, E141 O91; Princeton University Library, Rare Books Collection, EXKA Americana 1526 Oviedo and Biblioteca Nacional de España, R/3864. Henry Harrisse (1829-1910)

- see reference in Bibliography section below – found that every copy he examined of works written by Oviedo and printed during his lifetime bears the author's signature. It has been suggested that some authors of the time used their signature as a means of authenticating their work. I share this view and I believe that Oviedo flaunted his signature, at least, in the copies that he intended to offer.
4. In this case the match is almost perfect; however Oviedo's handwritten signature is not always thoroughly uniform, as can be seen at Oviedo's *General History* ("Montserrat Manuscript", Ms. HM 177, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA., USA and Ms. 9/555, Real Academia de la Historia, España) and *Libro de la Cámara Real del príncipe don Juan e officios de su casa e servicio ordinario*, Ms. II/826, Biblioteca del Palacio Real de Madrid.
 5. On these Oviedo's books which belonged to Sloane's library see *Sloane Printed Books Project* - URL: <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/sloane/about.aspx> and search the *Sloane Printed Books Catalogue* - URL: <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/sloane/Home.aspx>
 6. Costa, Júlio (2012), "No rasto português da biblioteca científico-médica de Hans Sloane: problemas e evidências", *Páginas a&b: arquivos e Bibliotecas*, 2 (9), pp. 91-108.
 7. About the Library of Viscounts of Balsemão and some of its scientific books, a few of them from Hispanic authors and about Natural history, see: Costa, Júlio (2012), "Alguns livros científicos (sécs. XVI e XVII) no 'Inventário' da Livraria dos Viscondes de Balsemão", *Ágora: Estudos Clássicos em Debate*, 14.1, pp. 131-158. Also available online at: <http://revistas.ua.pt/index.php/agora/article/view/2271>, [retrieved on 15/02/2016].

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SUBTITLES AND IMAGE CREDITS

Fig. 1: Illustrated title-page and signature detail of Oviedo's *About the natural history of the Indies* (Toledo, 1526), BPMP U-12-8; image credit: Municipal Library of Porto, Portugal.

Fig. 2: Aspect (folio 107 and detail in the autograph manuscript) of Oviedo's *Libro de la Cámara Real del príncipe don Juan e ofiçios de su casa e serviçio ordinario*. Año 1548. Real Biblioteca del Monasterio del Escorial, Ms. e-IV-8; image credit: Royal Library of San Lorenzo of the Escorial.

Fig. 3: Title-page and verso (and details) of Oviedo's *About the natural history of the Indies* (Toledo, 1526), BPMP U-12-8; images credits: Municipal Library of Porto, Portugal.

Fig. 4:

- BRITISH MUSEUM – *A catalogue of the duplicate books, coins, and medals ... : Which will be sold by auction, (by order of the Trustees) by Leigh and Sotheby ... on ... March 6th, 1788, and the s[ixte]n following days*, [London], Becket, etc., [1788], EPB 58525/B; image credit: Wellcome Library, London, United Kingdom.
- PORTO. Biblioteca Pública Municipal – *Litígios referentes às Livrarias Balsemão e Garrett com o Município do Porto*, Ms. BPMP B-1-15 (former shelfmark), 1846 copy from library sequestration documents and 1833 inventory; image credit: Municipal Library of Porto, Portugal.

Fig. 5:

- Detail of Oviedo's statue (by Joaquín Vaquero Turcios) in the Ozama Fortress, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; image credit: Author's photo.
- Sir Hans Sloane. Mezzotin by J. Faber, Junior, 1729, after Sir G. Kneller, 1716; image credit: Wellcome Library, London, United Kingdom.
- British Museum/Montagu House, drawing by Sutton Nichols, published in 1754; image credit: public domain (From Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons license).
- 1st Viscount of Balsemão, D. A. de Sequeira del.; M. M. de Aguiar engrav., 1801; image credit: National Library of Portugal.
- 2nd Viscount of Balsemão, portrait (detail), oil on canvas (probably painted in the first quarter of the nineteenth century). Owned by Vasco Pinto de Sousa Coutinho. Originally published by Luís Cabral, in *As Artes entre As Letras*, 13 May 2015, pp. 21; image credit: National Archive of Torre do Tombo, Portugal.
- Early Franciscan Convent (ca 1833), Oporto Royal Public Library since 1842. Original drawing by J. C. V. Vilanova, BPMP Ms. 1479 (drawing nº 102); image credit: Municipal Library of Porto, Portugal.