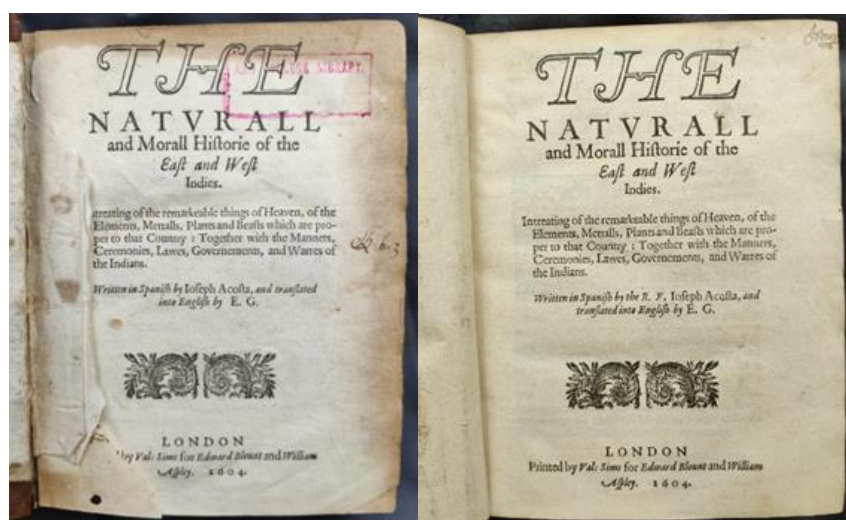


A Tale of Two Books: *The Naturall and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies* at New College Library

A modern printed text is, in most instances, exactly the same, regardless of the copy. Due to their age, though, antiquarian items are completely unique, with each copy of a printed text gaining an individual history of its own throughout the centuries. This Note shows this process in action by exploring the histories of two copies of the same text held at New College Library—an English translation of José de Acosta's *The Naturall and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies*, first published in 1604 (BT3.204.15 and BT3.204.16).¹ The readership, marginalia, binding, and provenance of these two copies are not only unique, but also provide insight into the history of New College, that of its alumni, and the development of its extensive library over the centuries.

First, though, an introduction to the book itself. Written by the Jesuit missionary José de Acosta around a century after Christopher Columbus's first voyage to the New World in 1492, *The Naturall and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies*—or *La historia natural y moral de las indias* to give the book its original Spanish title—was published towards the end of a period of unprecedented imperial expansion. Two 'arcs of conquest'² had spread across Central and South America in the sixteenth century. The first, led by Hernán Cortes, swept across modern-day Mexico from 1519 to 1522, subjugating the Aztec Empire. The second, beginning in 1532, spread southwards across the Pacific Ocean, with Francisco Pizarro moving across what is today Venezuela and Colombia before defeating the Inca Empire in their Peruvian heartlands. These conquests had not only created one of the largest empires in the world, but also one of the most diverse—in terms of geography, climate, and indigenous cultures. In turn, such diversity naturally attracted interest throughout Spain and further afield, with people expressing a desire to read more about the newly conquered lands. Acosta's book was an attempt to meet this demand, providing both a natural and moral history of the Spanish Empire in the New World. As Mignolo writes, it was, in essence, an effort to 'make sense of the novelty of lands, people, religious practices, and methods of organization that had been unknown' to a European audience.³



The title page of BT3.204.15 (left) and BT3.204.16 (right), New College Library, Oxford
These and following images © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

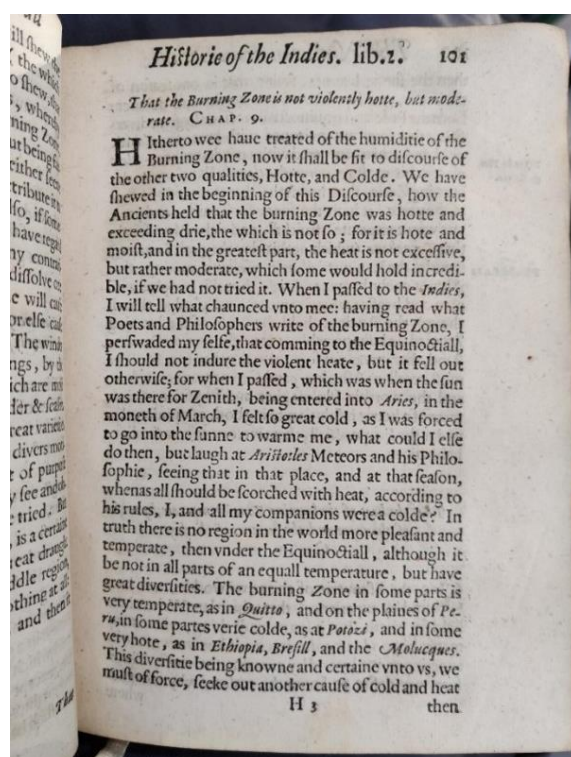
¹ The catalogue record can be found here: <https://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/permalink/44OXF_INST/35n82s/alma990154844540107026> (Accessed: 5 December 2023).

² J. H. Elliott, 'The Spanish Conquest and Settlement of America', in *The Cambridge History of Latin America: Volume I: Colonial Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 149–206, at p. 171.

³ Walter D. Mignolo, 'Introduction to José de Acosta's *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*', in José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, ed. Jane E. Mangan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. xvii–xxviii, at pp. xix–xx.

A collection of individual volumes focusing on various aspects of the New World, Acosta had written the first two volumes on natural history in Latin whilst in America. After returning to Spain, he added five others, combining all the volumes into the *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*.⁴ Originally conceived as a missionary text, the desire for information about the New World across Europe led to its rapid translation into several European languages. It was first translated into Italian in 1596, followed by Dutch in 1598, French in 1597, and German in 1601. Above, you can see the title pages of the two copies of the first English translation held at New College Library. Dating from 1604, you can see that the translator is unclear from the title page—only the initials ‘E. G.’ are given. These initials refer to Edward Grimston, who was both a writer and translator working during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In addition to Acosta, Grimston had also written a history of France and a general history of the Netherlands.⁵

On the whole, Grimston’s translation is credible and trustworthy, accurately reflecting the key issues raised by Acosta in the original text. Firstly, his translation emphasises both the theological and classical influences inherent to Acosta’s writing. Published ‘at the intersection of classical scholarship and new discoveries’,⁶ in this text, Acosta attempted to adapt both Christian and classical thought to the new discoveries made in America. A devout Catholic, Acosta had first become a Jesuit in 1553—seventeen years before he first set foot in America.⁷ He was, therefore, well-versed in the works of not only the traditional sacred texts of Christianity, but also the Classical texts that had been rediscovered as part of the European Renaissance.



New College Library, Oxford, BT3.204.15, p. 101

In *The History of the Indies*, Acosta often references these classical texts, with the work an attempt to adapt classical knowledge to the New World. An interesting example of this process can be found on page 101 (above), where Acosta describes crossing the equator for the first time:

⁴ Clements R. Markham, ‘Introduction’, in Joseph de Acosta, *The Natural & Moral History of the Indies: Volume I. The Natural History*, ed. Clements R. Markham (London: Hakluyt Society, 1880), pp. i–xvi, at pp. xi–xii.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. xiv.

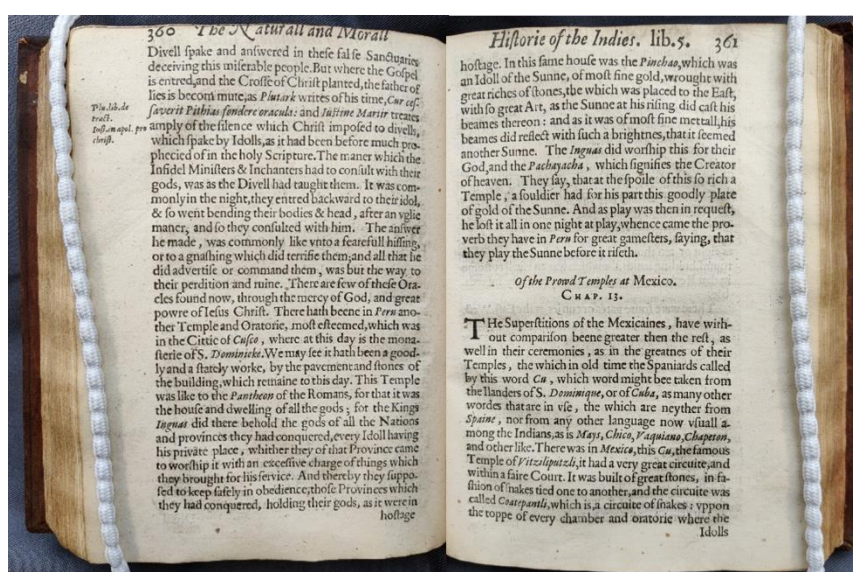
⁶ Mignolo, ‘Introduction’, p. xix.

⁷ Markham, ‘Introduction’, p. ii.

When I passed to the *Indies*, I will tell what chaunced unto mee: having read what Poets and Philosophers write of the burning Zone, I perswaded my selfe, that coming to the Equinoctiall, I should not indure the violent heate, but it fell out otherwise; for when I passed . . . I felt so great cold, as I was forced to go into the sunne to warme me, what could I else do then, but laugh at *Aristotles* Meteors and his Philosophie, seeing that in that place, and that season, whenas all should be scorched with heat, according to his rules, I, and all my companions, were a colde? [p.101]

The ‘violent heat’ that Acosta mentions refers to the ancient Greek concept of the *oikoumene* or ‘inhabitable world’. First developed during the fifth century BC, this idea divided the world into inhabitable regions and inhospitable regions.⁸ For over two thousand years, it had been widely believed that any travel across the equator would be made impossible by all-consuming heat.⁹ Naturally, the discovery and subsequent colonisation of the Americas altered this perspective. In this book, therefore, Acosta not only references classical knowledge, but also starts to adapt it to the New World and the new perspectives that geographical exploration brought to European thought.

The book, though, is not only a natural history of the Indies, but also a ‘moral’ one that describes the peoples that inhabited the New World. Indeed, the English translation for this text was partly popular because it gave a real sense of the lives and cultures of the dominant indigenous civilisations in Central and South America. Even today, the work is described as ‘one of the leading authorities on the ancient civilisations of Peru and Mexico’.¹⁰ It includes discussion of both the Aztec and Inca Empires, before finishing with an account of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan.



New College Library, Oxford, BT3.204.15, pp. 360–61

As Acosta was a Jesuit, it is perhaps not surprising that his text includes much detailed discussion of the religious practices of indigenous peoples across the Spanish Empire. On page 360 (above left), Acosta described the ‘Temple and Oratorie, most esteemed, which was in the Cittie of Cusco’. A reference to the Convent of Santo Domingo on this page reveals that Acosta

⁸ Margaret Small, *Framing the World: Classical Influences on Sixteenth-Century Geographical Thought* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2020), p. 2.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁰ Markham, ‘Introduction’, p. i.

here is describing the Coricancha.¹¹ Despite the conquest of the Incas by the Spanish, Acosta's choice of language is anything but contemptuous. Instead, the temple is described as a 'goodly and stately work', comparable to the Pantheon in Rome. This description of religious life is also by no means limited to Peru. Several pages, for example, are dedicated to the great temples located in the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, now Mexico City. Indeed, in the book Acosta contrasts indigenous civilisations, starting his description of the main Aztec temple in the city on page 361, directly next to the description of Cuzco mentioned above. Known today as the *Templo Mayor*, or Great Temple, this complex was the heart of Aztec society—it is no coincidence that it was the first set of buildings that the Spanish decided to demolish after the conquest.¹² Above, you can see the beginning of Acosta's description of this building, describing its physical characteristics as well as its dedication to the Aztec deity Vitziliputzli, or Huītzilōpōchtli to give its modern Nahuatl spelling.¹³ Together, both these pages and the later sections of the book provide a fascinating introduction into the indigenous civilisations across the Spanish Empire in America. As these civilisations had developed in complete geographical isolation from Europe, it is not surprising that there was such a clamour for information about these lands across the continent, and a subsequent desire for accurate and up-to-date translations.

Now that we have discussed the content, translation history, and background of Acosta's text, we can turn our attention to the two individual copies of the text held at New College Library. Although they should, theoretically, contain exactly the same information for the reader, a closer analysis reveals that they both have individual stories to tell. Firstly, there are key differences in the binding of the two volumes.



The binding of the two books—BT3.204.15 (left) and BT3.204.16 (right), New College Library, Oxford

Before the modern period, books were not often sold with an identical binding. Instead, they were sold as individual sheets, which the purchaser or bookseller would bind locally.¹⁴ Above,

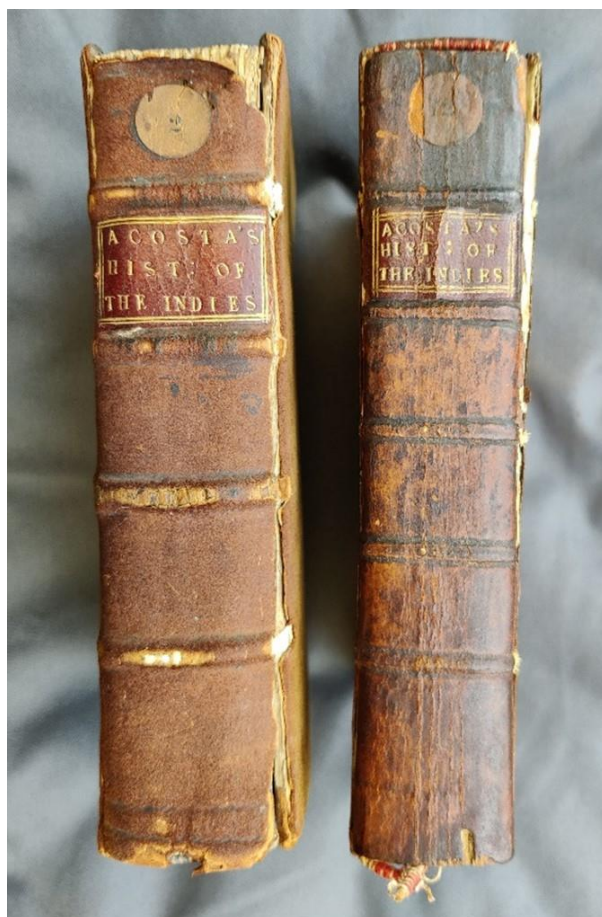
¹¹ A temple dedicated to the Inca sun god Inti, the Coricancha was the most important religious building in the entire Inca Empire. For more information see Ian Farrington, 'Cuzco: Development of the Imperial Capital', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Incas*, ed. Sonia Alconini and Alan Covey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 71–90, at pp. 72–9.

¹² José Luis de Rojas, *Tenochtitlan: Capital of the Aztec Empire* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), p. 55.

¹³ Huītzilōpōchtli was the patron god of the Aztecs, who led the Aztec people southward towards the Basin of Mexico, the heart of the Aztec Empire: see David Carrasco, *The Aztecs: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 28.

¹⁴ See Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 1995), p. 146.

you can see an example of this process. Both bindings are contemporary 17th-century reverse calf¹⁵ over boards, with the characteristic two chain holes towards the top right-hand edge of the upper board, typical of books in New College Library. There are, though, key differences in terms of decoration and support. BT3.204.15 is a plainer binding (on the left), with triple blind fillets towards the outer edges of the boards. BT3.204.16, meanwhile, is more decorated, including a centre panel design using fillets, which is also repeated on the reverse board.



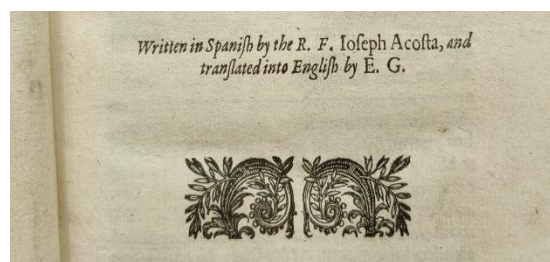
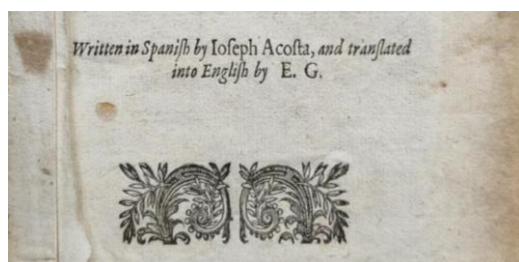
The spines of the two books—BT3.204.15 (left) and BT3.204.16 (right), New College Library, Oxford

Although it is more decorated, it is not as well bound. On the right, above, you can see the spine of BT3.204.16, showing its raised bands that are designed to support the binding. However, only three of these supports are real, with the other two false bands. On the spine of the plainer binding, there are only four supports. Despite this, all of these supports are not only real, but also thicker. Interestingly, this extra support has aided the binding over the centuries. Although both have been damaged over time, the front board has completely detached itself from the more decorated binding. One of the sewed supports on the plainer binding, though, has managed to survive, still keeping the front board attached four centuries after it was originally created. These two books suggest, therefore, that a plainer but better supported binding may be a better investment long term than a more decorated, but weaker one.

When the book is opened, the reader might expect to find exactly the same written text. After all, printed texts were often printed in the same printer's office and using the same type. These two works appear to be no different at first glance—despite the difference in binding style

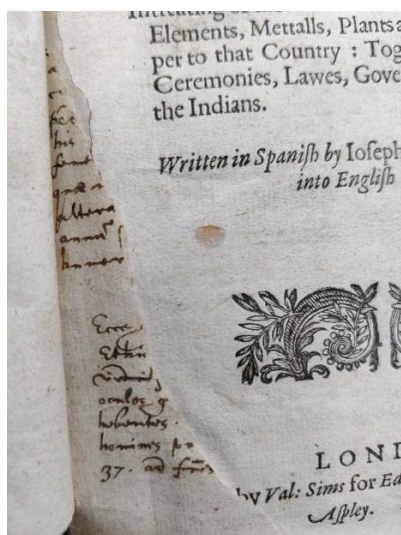
¹⁵ Reverse calf refers to the fact that the leather was turned around, so that 'the external surface [was] a velvety, slightly hairy one, rather than a hard and smooth one': David Peason, *English Bookbinding Styles, 1450–1800: A Handbook* (London: British Library, 2005), p. 18.

they are the same book after all. A slight difference, though, is still apparent at the start of the volume, despite the identical decoration.



Statement of responsibility on title pages—BT3.204.15 (left) and BT3.204.16 (right), New College Library, Oxford

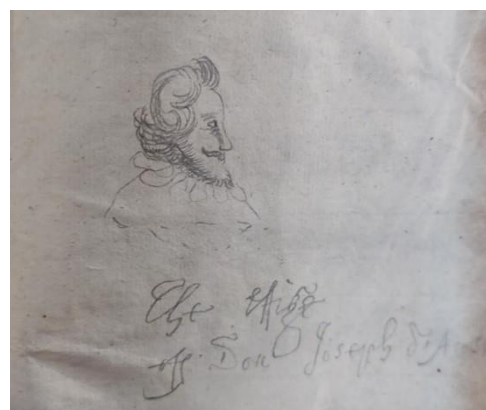
If you look at the statement of responsibility on the two title pages (pictured above), BT3.204.16 contains the additional text ‘the R. F.’ before Joseph Acosta. As a title page would have to be set before being sent to the printer, this slight variation proves that the type was changed for the title page at some point during the printing process. These two volumes, therefore, constitute two different variants of the same text, perhaps produced at a slightly different time or even in another printer’s office. Even two texts in the same edition, therefore, can contain slight differences.



Manuscript additions on stub page BT3.204.15

At some point in the history of BT3.204.15, the surviving content has changed again. In the picture to the left, you can see that signature A1 had been removed from BT3.204.15, with only a stub page surviving. The surviving signature in BT3.204.16 is blank, so this signature would presumably also have been blank. The stub, though, reveals that somebody extensively annotated this page at one point in Latin. As most of the text has vanished, it is impossible to ascertain the precise nature of these manuscript additions. The fact that it was ripped out, though, reveals that either the writer of the additions, or a subsequent reader, was displeased with them. Indeed, the signature was ripped out without apparent care, not only leaving the stub visible today, but also very nearly detaching the surviving title page itself. These two books are not only slightly different variations of Acosta’s text, but have also had a very different readership throughout the centuries.

This readership history is not only obvious from an analysis of the title page and opening signatures. Instead, different readers have altered both volumes in different ways throughout the centuries. Apart from the unknown hand appearing on the stub of signature A1, BT3.204.15 mainly contains clean, unaltered text. If you turn to the very back of the volume, though, a reader at some point has included an intriguing pencil sketch (pictured to the right). This sketch consists of an imagined portrait of José de Acosta on the final blank leaf—with the artist even writing a caption below his portrait so that future readers would be able to identify the subject of their work!



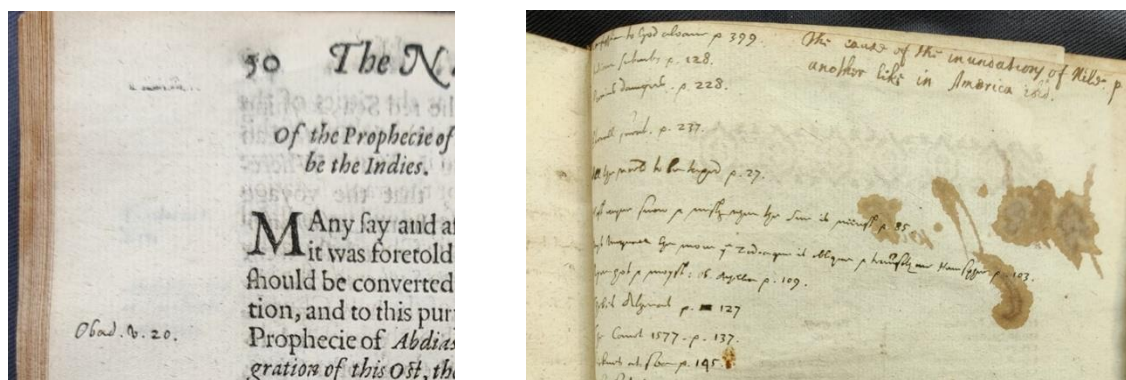
The sketch of José de Acosta, complete with caption at the end of BT3.204.15

The text of BT3.204.16 is completely different. Instead of the clean, crisp pages of BT3.204.15, it instead contains the marginalia of at least three different readers over the centuries. Towards the centre of the book, the first hand has, at one point, even corrected aspects of the written text. In the image below, you can see their proof reading in action. On page 335, the grammar has been corrected and on page 368, the correct word has been inserted following a misprint. Proof pages would have been printed following the setting of a book, but normally with the intention of discovering and rectifying mistakes before multiple sheets were printed¹⁶—they would not then be bound into a finished book. The fact that these mistakes are printed in exactly the same way in BT3.204.16 suggests that they were simply not noticed during the printing press, remaining in the text until a subsequent reader took it upon themselves to correct them.



Manuscript corrections to the grammar and spelling in BT3.204.16

The second hand visible in this book is in a much darker ink, revealing that the text was actively consulted. Instead of correcting the work's grammar, this reader has instead added several marginal notes throughout. One example of this can be seen on page 48, pictured below left. This page was actually printed as page 50—another mistake by the printer. At the end of the work, this second hand has also added an extensive set of index notes, pictured below right. These notes describe what appears on specific pages of the text. Together with the marginal notes in the same hand throughout, they reveal that this copy of Acosta's text was actively and extensively consulted at one point in its history.



An example marginal note (left); index notes (right)—both in BT3.204.16

Finally, at the end of the text a third hand has included a final manuscript addition (pictured below). The text reads 'Septentrio, Auster, Subsolanus, Favonius, Lima to Manilla'. The Latin text refers to the names of classical nautical winds, as understood by the ancient Greeks and Romans. Septentrio or Aparctias was defined by Aristotle as a north wind,¹⁷ Auster or Notus was the south wind,¹⁸ Subsolanus or Apeliotes was an eastern wind that blew from the equinoctial sunrise,¹⁹ and

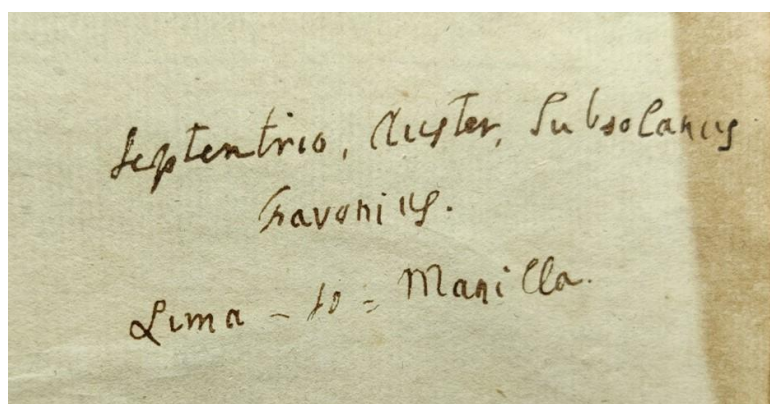
¹⁶ Gaskell, *New Introduction*, p. 110.

¹⁷ Eugene S. McCartney, 'Greek and Roman Weather Lore of Winds', *The Classical Weekly* 24 (2) (13 October 1930), 11–16, at p. 13.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 14.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 14.

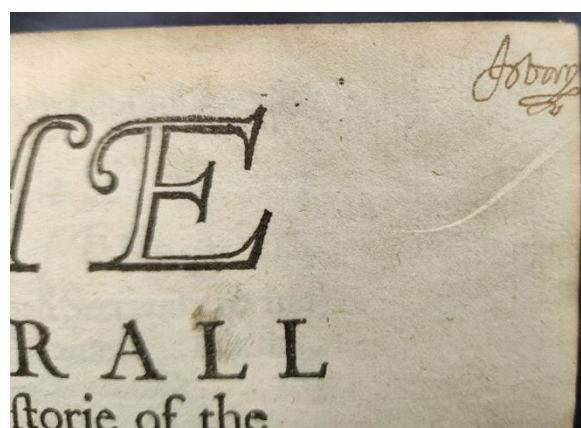
finally Favonius or Zephyr blew from the West.²⁰ Reference to Manila in the Philippines in this text is not surprising—Acosta directly refers to the archipelago on page 18 of the text, writing ‘this day our men sayle in the South Sea unto China and the Philippines; and wee say, that to go from Peru to those parts, they passe a greater Sea, then in going from Spaine to Peru’.



Winds written at the back of BT3.204.16, describing a voyage from Lima to Manilla

The fact that a reader is considering the winds required to sail between Lima in Peru and Manilla in the Philippines reveals sustained engagement with the text. It provides evidence that readers—presumably at New College—were taking part in a similar process to Acosta himself in the text—effectively adapting classical knowledge to fit the new discoveries made in the New World and beyond. Although understandably not recommended practice in modern libraries, this argument can be applied to all the manuscript additions described above, as they all are evidence of a clear historical engagement with Acosta’s text and its content.

We have, therefore, now established that these two texts are unique in terms of their content and their readership. Fortunately, an investigation into their provenance allows us to build a picture of at least some of the readers discussed above that owned and used the two books. The provenance history of these books can be perfectly contrasted. For some books, such as BT3.204.16, the provenance history can only be glimpsed at by further analysing the marginalia. To the right, you can see that a hand has written what appears to be the word ‘Isbury’ on the title page. The main connection between this family name and New College are Isbury’s almshouses in Lambourn, Berkshire. These almshouses had been founded a century prior to the publication of this work—in 1501—by a John Isbury or Estbury, who ‘endowed an almshouse for ten poor people and a priest to teach a free grammar school there’.²¹ Together with the almshouses, John Isbury founded a chantry at Lambourn church. Although dissolved at the general dissolution of chantries, the advowson for this chantry belonged to the warden of New College.²² As we know that many members of the



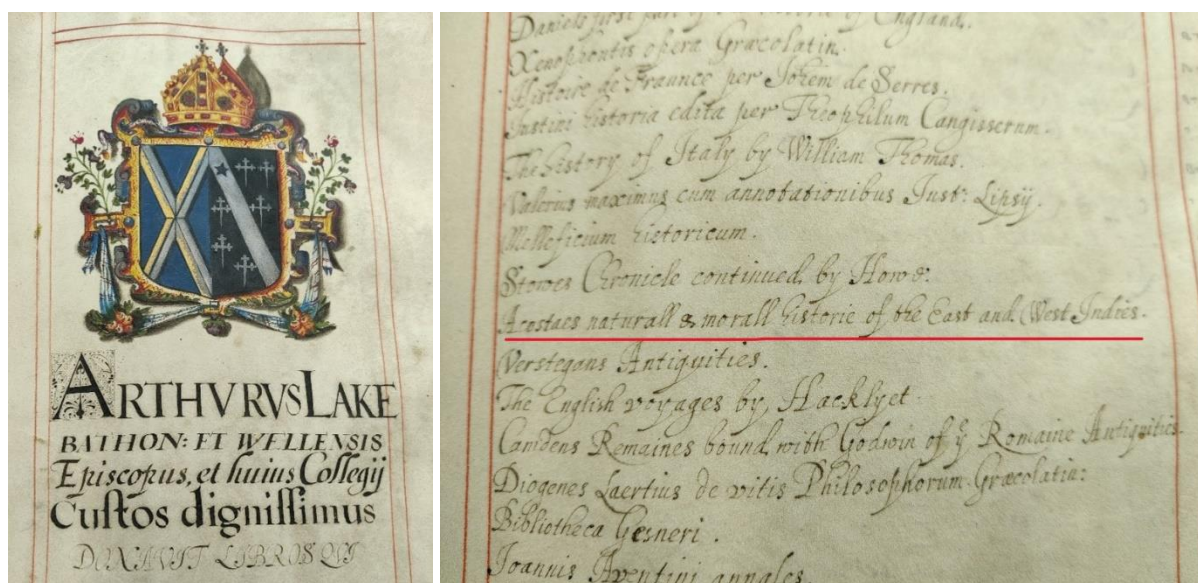
Title page [detail] of BT3.204.16

²⁰ Eugene S. McCartney, ‘Greek and Roman Weather Lore of Winds’, *The Classical Weekly* 24 (2) (13 October 1930), 11–16, at p. 15.

²¹ William Page and P. H. Ditchfield (eds), *The Victoria History of the County of Berkshire: Volume Four* (London: St Catherine Press, 1924), p. 252.

²² *ibid.*, p. 252. More information relating to John Isbury’s benefaction can be found in New College Archives, Oxford, NCA/G/BREK/LAM/1. The main archive of the Isbury almshouse, though, is held in Berkshire County Record Office (ref. D/Q1).

Isbury family lived in Lambourn throughout several generations,²³ this copy of Acosta's text could have been a donation from a subsequent member of the Isbury family. Although it is difficult to prove anything beyond doubt, the one word written on the title page provides a clue about the past ownership of this volume.



Arthur Lake's coat of arms at the start of the list of books he donated to the library (left); the entry for Acosta's book, underlined in red (right)—both from the library Benefactors' Book, New College Library, Oxford

The provenance history of the library's second copy of this text cannot be more different. Thanks to the library Benefactors' Book (see above), we know that BT3.204.15 was donated to the Library by Warden Arthur Lake, after he left New College to become the bishop of Bath and Wells in 1616. Wells was an extremely generous donor to the library, presenting around five hundred volumes of his own books. Indeed, the library's entire Benefactors' Book was created following this donation, as it included a register to record his own, and subsequent, benefactions.²⁴ An important figure in New College history, Lake became a fellow in 1589 and then warden in 1613. Interestingly in terms of Acosta's text, Lake also had a clear interest in the New World, with a particular focus on evangelical matters. In a sermon in the House of Lords in July 1625, he urged that the gospel be taken to the New World. He even mentioned to John White of Dorchester—fellow New College alumnus and founder of the Massachusetts Bay company—that he would have accompanied him to the New World if he were younger.²⁵ It is, therefore, not surprising that Lake would have been interested in acquiring Acosta's text. He had a clear interest in the New World and the theological issues surrounding its exploration and subsequent settlement by Europeans—a clear and obvious provenance that could not be more different from the more ambiguous provenance note that survives in New College's other copy of this text.

To conclude, this New College Note has demonstrated that the two copies of *The Naturall and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies* are by no means exactly the same. The text might be mostly identical, but the reader or librarian that wrote 'Duplicate' in large letters at the front of BT3.204.16 is only partially correct. A more thorough analysis of the book has revealed that the two copies have a readership, marginalia, provenance, and binding that are completely unique,

²³ Page and Ditchfield, *Victoria History*, p. 265.

²⁴ For more information, see William Poole, 'New College Library Benefactors' Book 1601–1610: An Edition', *New College Notes* 9 (2018), no. 6.

²⁵ Kenneth Fincham, 'Lake, Arthur (bap. 1567, d. 1626)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (3 January 2008) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15896>> (Accessed: 13 December 2023).

revealing how the books have been used throughout the centuries. Acosta's text, as discussed above, is important and unique in its own right—with its translation into English key to understanding a growing English interest in the New World and its subsequent settlement during this period. The unique nature of the two copies at New College Library, though, only adds to this history, as an analysis of the copies provides glimpses into the manufacture of the two books and the readers that were interested in Acosta's text in seventeenth-century Oxford. In turn, though, these two copies demonstrate the importance of all the rare books in New College Library, emphasising that they all have a unique history, even if at first glance some of them might appear to be exactly the same.

Will Shire
Deputy Librarian
New College, Oxford