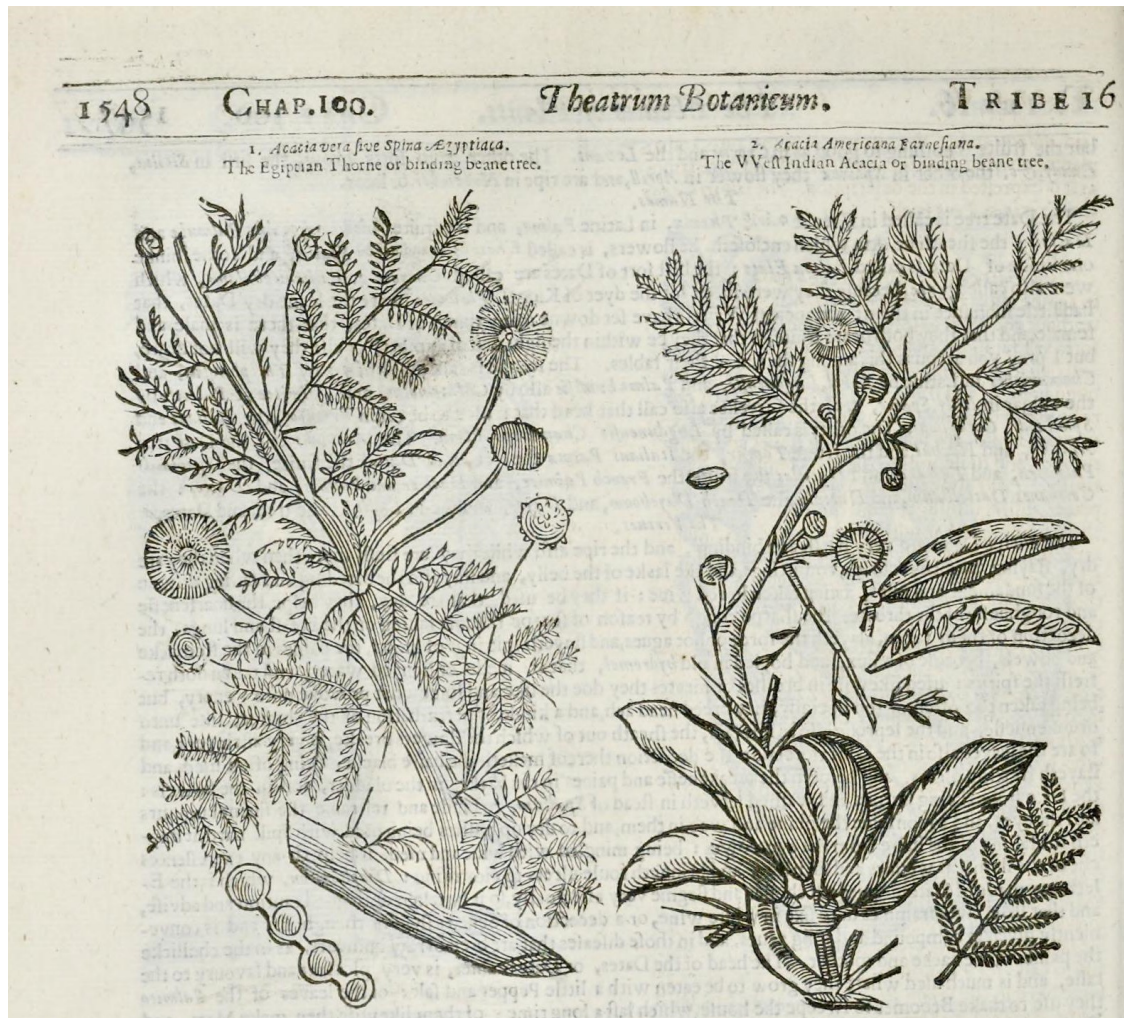


ACACIAS IN A BOTANICAL THEATRE: LINKING THE OLD AND NEW WORLDS



The branches of these two acacias, figured in a divergent arrangement in John Parkinson's *Theatrum botanicum* (London, 1640), suggest that they could stem from an invisible common trunk, hidden below. If these acacias intersect the Old and the New Worlds in a metaphorical way, they also bridge it phylogenetically, an aspect that current research attempts to untangle, using molecular techniques. The pairing in this picture, if it were not the result of a stroke of intuition, can only be explained by a stroke of botanical theatre.

These two acacias were illustrated side by side, for the first time, in Parkinson's *Theatrum*, a monumental folio edition, being the last breath of a kind of herbal treatise that paved the way for new taxonomic conceptions. Parkinson brings into play 'strains' of plants of renowned medicinal interest, adapting previously published prints to illustrate them. On the right side, a flowering branch of an Egyptian acacia is depicted, the thorny plant from which gum arabic

flows, described by Theophrastus and Dioscorides and surveyed in Egypt by botanical travelers such as Pierre Belon and Prospero Alpino, during the 16th century. Facing it, an American acacia is shown, a thorny plant as well, with globose inflorescences and swollen fruits, being a novelty for European botany, introduced to Rome in 1611. In Parkinson's *Theatrum*, the Egyptian acacia also shows the fragment of a typical pod, the whole figure being derived from a woodcut printed in *De plantis Aegyptiis observationes* (Padova, 1638). Its author, Johann Vesling, anatomist and botanist, lived for some years in Egypt until he returned to Padova, where he directed the university's botanical garden. By contrast, the figure of the American acacia is the adaptation of an etching whose outline is attributed to Jacopo Ligozzi, having been printed in Tobias Aldini's *Exactissima descriptio rariorum quarundam plantarum* (Rome, 1625). In this book, exotic and rare plants grown in the Roman gardens of Cardinal Odoardo Farnese, great-grandson of D. Manuel I of Portugal, are illustrated and described, including *Acacia Indica Farnesiana*, the pilgrim plant whose seeds had been brought from the Antilles. This new acacia was ultimately spread in Italy and across the Mediterranean region, being recorded in Portugal in 1661, cultivated in France from the end of the 17th century for its perfumed flowers, and welcomed in Egypt, where it flourished in the gardens of Cairo in the early 18th century. It later spread into the rural landscape, side by side with Egyptian acacias, and its flowers are still harvested for perfumery in contemporary Egypt, the last country of the Mediterranean where this activity remains alive.

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I thank Richard Aitken for his kind collaboration in revising the translation.

BOTANICAL NOMENCLATURE

Acacia vera sive *Spina Aegyptiaca*

Acacia nilotica (L.) Delile [= *Vachellia nilotica* (L.) P.J.H. Hurter & Mabb.]

Acacia Americana Farnesiana / *Acacia Indica Farnesiana*

Acacia farnesiana (L.) Willd. [= *Vachellia farnesiana* (L.) Wight & Arn.]

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How to cite: FERNANDES, Manuel Miranda - «Acacias in a botanical theatre: linking the old and new worlds» [In line]. Porto: Rede Portuguesa de História Ambiental, 2020. Available in <http://www.reportha.org/pt/news/item/505-naturae-theatrum-et-mundum-the-theatre-of-nature-and-the-world-o-teatro-da-natureza-e-do-mundo>