

## HEADING REPORT(H)A: The theatre of nature and the world

### 400 YEARS OF A REMARKABLE BOOK

#### The illustrated description of the plants grown in the Farnese gardens in Rome

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Frontispiece of Tobias Aldini's work, with a description of the plans for the Farnese gardens in Rome (1625).

Source: Getty Research Institute via Internet Archive.  
<https://archive.org/details/exactissimadescr00aldi/page/n4/mode/1up>

In 1625, a jubilee year proclaimed by Pope Urban VIII, Giacomo Mascardi, one of Rome's most prolific publishers and printers, released a curious botanical book with descriptions of the plants cultivated in the *Orti Farnesiani*. These magnificent Roman gardens, located on the Palatine Hill, belonged to Cardinal Odoardo Farnese (1573-1626) and offered visitors a grandiose architectural display intertwined with exquisite plant arrangements. They featured porticos, staircases, terraces, fountains, statues, a grotto, two aviaries – and, of course, flower beds with cultivated plants, some of them remarkably rare. Written in Latin, the book contains an accurate description of a selection of sixteen plants, some of which were botanical novelties, mentioned for the first time in the European context. Its author, Tobias Aldini (1570–1662), a physician and botanist from Cesena and curator of the Farnese gardens, dedicated the first of the plants described to his patron – an acacia native to the New World, which he named *Acacia Indica Farnesiana*, now known as *Vachellia farnesiana*

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(L.) Wight & Arn. His colleague Pietro Castelli (c.1570-c.1660), also a physician and botanist, collaborated with Aldini in writing the work, thus causing a controversy over authorship that has reached the present day. Full-page engravings, remarkably delineated from living models by Jacopo Ligozzi (1547–1627), illustrate the descriptions of the plants. They were engraved by Luca Ciamberlano (c.1580-1641), who also designed the architectural frontispiece of the book. The frontispiece is surmounted by the Farnese coat of arms, with six fleurs-de-lis, flanked by two winged putti, each holding a bouquet of medicinal plants. At the bottom, Theophrastus and Dioscorides, two emblematic personalities of classical botany, are seated facing each other. Theophrastus (c.371-c.287 BC), author of *De Historia Plantarum*, seems to be reflecting on his reading, and Dioscorides (c.40-c.90), author of *De Materia Medica*, rests his head on his hand, looking directly at the reader.

Although describing a small number of plants in just over 100 pages, in a literary style rich in erudition, with profuse quotations from ancient and contemporary authors, this work highlights the botanical importance of the gardens of the Italian aristocracy in the early 17th century. Alongside university botanical gardens and apothecary gardens, they displayed new plant species from remote locations, which circulated through exchange networks with the collaboration of various agents, at a time when the limits of the known world were constantly expanding. Some of the rare plants described by Aldini / Castelli quickly spread beyond the boundaries of gardens and became widespread throughout Italy and the Mediterranean region, becoming an integral part of the landscape. This happened with the Farnesian acacia, but also with maguey, which is also of American origin, described under the name *Aloes Americana Florida*, currently designated *Agave americana* L. It was used to form hedges around crops or grazing areas, especially in arid regions, becoming common in the south of the Iberian Peninsula, where it spreads without human assistance, although it is still appreciated in public and private gardens. It gives the landscape a certain “Mexican” character, which was noticed by the producers of Spaghetti Westerns in the 1960s, who chose southern Spain to film outdoor scenes, as is the case in several well-known films by Sergio Leone (1929-1989).

Four hundred years later, Aldini / Castelli's work is a rare book, available for consultation in a few libraries, including some in Portugal, and also just a click away in

various digital repositories. On occasion, a copy appears at auction, fetching prices in excess of €10,000. A facsimile edition, accompanied by a translation of the Latin text into Spanish, published in 1999, made this extraordinary work accessible to a wider audience.

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