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# NEW WORLD OBJECTS of KNOWLEDGE

*A Cabinet of Curiosities*

Edited by Mark Thurner and Juan Pimentel





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Cover image: *El Quadro de Historia Natural, Civil y Geográfica del Reyno del Perú, año de 1799.*

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# OPOSSUM

*José Ramón Marcaida*

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Of the long list of novel creatures featured in early modern descriptions of the New World, the opossum stands out as particularly wondrous and curious. On the one hand, numerous testimonies point to the opossum's 'composite' or 'chimerical' appearance, conventionally referring to it as 'monstrous'. Thus, Spanish explorer Vicente Yáñez Pinzón (1462–1514), whose account is regarded as one of the earliest, refers to it as a 'Monster, the foremost part resembling a Fox, the hinder a Monkey, the feet were like a Man's, with Ears like an Owl'. On the other hand, and more significantly, many accounts remark on the peculiar presence of a pouch in the opossum's belly, the *marsupium*.

Natural historical interest in such wondrous characteristics, and the fact that the opossum was widely distributed across the American hemisphere, would account for the pervasiveness of this animal in period textual sources. Although these sources often record its local name, e.g. *tlacuatzin/tlaquatzin*, *carigueya*, *micurén*, *churcha* or (*o*)*possum* – the latter word deriving from the name for the animal in the Powhatan language that was spoken in Virginia – as in the case of other New World creatures like the armadillo or the parrot, the opossum was regularly depicted as a sign for America and was thus featured in a range of visual montages such as Martin Waldseemüller's 1516 *Carta Marina* or Étienne Delaune and Marcus Gheeraerts's *Four Parts of the World* print series (1575 and 1575–1610).

The highly symbolic opossum was the subject of lively debate in the early modern period. An account of the dissection of a female specimen performed by the English physician and fellow of the Royal Society Edward Tyson was published as an entire issue of the *Philosophical Transactions* in 1698.<sup>1</sup> Tyson's study featured more than a dozen sources on the opossum, ranging from naturalist accounts by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478–1557) and Georg Marcgraf (1610–44) to reports by John Smith (c.1580–1631) and Ralph Hamor (c.1589–1626). Of particular interest to the history of the opossum as an object-image of knowledge is the treatise entitled *Historia naturae, maxime peregrinae*, written by the Spanish Jesuit scholar Juan Eusebio Nieremberg (1595–1658).<sup>2</sup> A prolific and widely read author better known for his theological and devotional writings, Nieremberg was the first holder of the chair of natural history at the Reales Estudios (founded in 1629) of the Jesuit Colegio Imperial in Madrid. As reflected in *Historia naturae* and other publications,

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<sup>1</sup> E. Tyson, 'Carigueya, seu marsupiale americanum, or, the anatomy of an opossum, dissected at Gresham-College by Edw. Tyson, M.D. fellow of the College of Physicians, and of the Royal Society, and reader of anatomy at the Chyrurgeons-Hall, in London', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 20, no. 239, (1698): 105–64.

<sup>2</sup> J.E. Nieremberg, *Historia naturae, maxime peregrinae* (Antwerp: Plantin-Moretus Press, 1635).

his natural historical and natural philosophical interests were varied, ranging from the investigation of monsters and other natural wonders to enquiries into occult philosophy and magic. In a chapter devoted to ‘animals with pouches’, Nieremberg proceeds to present and contrast a number of written descriptions of the opossum, which he calls by its Nahuatl name *tlaquatzin/tlacuatzin*, starting with the corpus of materials compiled by the 16th-century Spanish physician Francisco Hernández (1514–87) during his seven-year-long, state-sponsored expedition to New Spain (1570–77). Nieremberg had at his disposal the expedition texts and illustrations – kept, at the time, at the library of El Escorial – as well as other Hernández materials preserved at the library of his own Colegio Imperial. Nieremberg’s discussion of the opossum makes ample use of Hernández’s writings, which include allusions to the wondrous artifice of its pouch and a reference to its striking congenital ability to ‘play dead’ in front of its captors. Nieremberg also transcribes Hernández’s significant account of the local medicinal use of the opossum. A drachma of the tlaquatzin’s powdered tail, mixed with water and drunk on its own at various intervals, would cleanse the urinary tract, stimulate the production of urine and milk, increase the libido, heal fractures and colic, speed up delivery and cause the period to start. Additionally, when applied on the body, the powdered tail could help the extraction of thorns and would soften the belly. Nieremberg adds a brief extract from the work of the Spanish chronicler Antonio de Herrera (1549–1626): the opossum’s tail is a good remedy to treat fever and to help pregnant women go into labour.

Nieremberg’s chapter also features extracts from authors such as Peter Martyr d’Anghiera (1457–1526), Girolamo Cardano (1501–76) and Hans Staden (c.1525–79), whose accounts tend to privilege the pouch as the opossum’s most striking feature. Regarding the medicinal use of the animal’s tail, this information had been known to Europeans for quite some time, not least through various 16th-century written accounts, including Bernardino de Sahagún’s *General History of the Things of New Spain* and the *Codex de la Cruz-Badiano*, as well as two of the first printed treatises to feature Hernández’s texts: Juan de Barrios’s *Verdadera medicina, cirugía y astrología*, published in Mexico City in 1607, and Francisco Ximénez’s *Quatro libros de la naturaleza y virtudes*

*de las plantas y animales que estan recebidos en el uso de la medicina en la Nueva España*, also published in Mexico City, in 1615.<sup>3</sup> These accounts remark upon the purgative power of the opossum’s tail and praise its effects when administered to pregnant women during difficult deliveries.

Nieremberg’s chapter features a new illustration of the opossum (Figure 1). Taking up most of the folio-sized page, it is one of the most arresting images in the whole treatise, which features 70 woodcut illustrations. It represents a female tlaquatzin and her offspring, which appear to be emerging from her pouch. The woodcut nicely depicts such features as the opossum’s small head, pointed snout and vivid eyes, as well as its long and curly fur and its hairless and snakelike tail. The illustration is especially effective in capturing the overall appearance of the opossum, in a way that makes it stand out from earlier depictions of this animal. Evidence that the image was appreciated by period readers can be found in Tyson’s account of his dissection of the animal, where in the context of a review of previously published illustrations of the opossum he writes that the one featured in Nieremberg’s treatise ‘seems to be taken from the Life’ and, although ‘not in all Particulars exact’, ‘is much to be preferred before the others’. This image of the opossum bears the initials of Christoffel Jegher (1596–1652), an important 17th-century Flemish wood engraver who worked for the Plantin-Moretus Press in Antwerp in the 1620s and 1630s. Jegher is best known for the series of woodcuts that he produced in collaboration with Peter Paul Rubens, regarded as landmarks in the use of this technique during the 17th century. Nieremberg’s opossum served as a model for later representations of the animal, such as the illustration featured in Jan

<sup>3</sup> B. de Sahagún’s *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (16th century, manuscript), Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence; Martín de la Cruz and Juan Badiano, *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indorum Herbis or Codex de la Cruz-Badiano* (Tlatelolco, Mexico, 1552), Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City; J. de Barrios, *Verdadera medicina, cirugía y astrología* (Mexico City: Fernando Balli, 1607); F. Ximénez, *Quatro libros de la naturaleza y virtudes de las plantas y animales que estan recebidos en el uso de la medicina en la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Widow of Diego López Dávalos, 1615).

## TLAQUATZIN.



## CAPVT IV.

De animalibus manticatis,  
sive Tlaquatzinis.

**N**on minus admiranda fera, quam Indi vocant *tlaquatzin*. Antonius Herrera *tlaquatzin* dixit: recentes Hispani Scriptores corrupto nonnihil nomine *tlaquacum*, Cardanus *chiurcam*, siue *chuciam*, Stadenius *Sernoy*, Nomenclator *semi-vulpam*, seu *lopecopithecum*: Raphe Hamor in descriptione Virginiae *apofumen* dixit; alij *ancham*, alij

*sasapim*, alij *cerigonem* dixere, quia sic vocatur species vulpeculæ apud Brasiliam & Malucas, sed ea, de qua exordium sermonis institimus, etiam in Dariene & Florida reperitur. Animal est parui canis formæ & magnitudine, binos dodrantes longum, rostro tenui, proluxo atque depili, exili capite, tenuissimis mollissimisque auriculis, ac pæne translucentibus, pilo longo & candido, sed circa extrema fulco aut nigro. Cauda tereti, duos dodrantes longâ, & persimili colubrinæ, fuscâ, sed postremò candidâ, quâ mordicus &

Figure 1. Opossum (*tlaquatzin*) in J. E. Nieremberg. *Historia naturæ, maxime peregrinæ* (Antwerp: Plantin-Moretus Press, 1635).

Jonston's *Historiae naturalis de quadrupedibus libri* and Jan van Kessel the Elder's *Four Parts of the World* (1660, Prado Museum).<sup>4</sup>

Numerous references to Nieremberg's work in period accounts show the extent to which his texts and images circulated and were appropriated for a variety of purposes. Long regarded as a mere compiler of other authors' writings, Nieremberg has recently won praise for his cunning amalgamation of descriptions, testimonies and ideas. *Historia naturae* in particular appears to have been extensively consulted by early moderns in relation to the natural and medical knowledge extracted from the Hernández expedition materials and other sources. The case of the opossum illustrates the important textual and visual dimensions that, in turn, guaranteed the global impact of such New World knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> J. Jonston, *Historiae naturalis de quadrupedibus libri* (Amsterdam: Johann Jacob Schipper, 1657).