

JESUIT CODICES AND HERBARIUMS: Comparative analysis between Segismundo Asperger's and Pedro Montenegro's work

Professor Dra. Ana María Perkins

There have been many renowned members of the Church whose names are recorded in the botanic history of America, among others Pedro Montenegro and Segismundo Asperger. Unfortunately, to date many of their original manuscripts have not been found, although in some cases, we do have copies made by third parties. We do not know if said copies are true to the original version or not. This is therefore, the reason for this research.

Thus, Father Lozano names Brother Pedro Montenegro as the author of one of them; Azara mentions and translates the writings of Segismundo Asperger from Latin; Damersay finds a manuscript by Montenegro himself in the hands of Pedro Ferré, in Uruguay and he mentions another Herbarium by a Father Sigismundi (who, according to Arata can only be Father Segismundo Asperger) and he also mentions the *Arbol de la vida* (A Tree of Life), a manuscript on plants, dated 1735, owned by E. de Sylva Maia, from Río de Janeiro; and Martín Spuch cites a Codex called *Libro compuesto por el hermano Montenegro, de la Compañía de Jesús* (Book Composed by Brother Montenegro, from the Society of Jesus) dated 1711.

Because of all these references and many more, it was mistakenly believed that there were different Missionary Herbaria. This criterion lasted until Pedro N. Arata, in a remarkable work published in *La Biblioteca*, in 1898, established the existence of **only one herbarium** and he inferred that the different copies known - some profusely lengthened or transformed - had **a common origin**.

In the research that enabled Arata to reach these conclusions, he compared four different manuscripts: an anonymous one dated May 3rd., 1790 from the town of San Angel (Jesuit Missionary town in the province of Paraguay); another one whose author is Father Asperger, in a copy made in 1872, in the hands of Juan María Gutiérrez; a third manuscript which belonged to Juan José Montes de Oca, called *Plantas de Misiones* (Missionary Plants), also anonymous and finally, Brother Pedro Montenegro's manuscript, in the *Biblioteca Nacional de Buenos Aires, Reserved Sector*.

In the careful comparison of the manuscripts carried out by Arata, there is evidence that they all are a copy of Brother Montenegro's Codex.

In the course of this present research, when personally comparing *Materia Médica Misionera*, by Brother Pedro Montenegro, published in 1945 in its full and true version by the *Biblioteca Nacional Argentina*, with the copy translated from Latin of Segismundo Asperger's work, done by Félix de Azara, who called it "Apuntes de varias cosas tendientes a esta provincia (del Paraguay) sacadas del P. S. Asperger exjesuíta de esas Misiones del Uruguay and Félix de Azara" (Notes from Several Things, Tending to this Province (Paraguay), taken from Father Asperger, ex Jesuit from these Missions of Uruguay and Felix de Azara), Presumably Year 1865, found in the *Archivo General de la Nación* (Nation's General Files), there appears that:

No drawings are observed in Asperger's work. Besides, he divided it into two parts: Chapter 1 (Page 1 begins with the virtues of Cacao) and *Libro Segundo De las Yervas y Raíces Medicinales y comestibles destas Misiones y Paraguay con algunas del Brasil y Provincia de Chile* (Second Book from the Herbs and Medi-

cial and Edible Roots of these Missions and Paraguay, together with some from Brazil and the Province of Chile).

Whereas, “**Materia Médica Misionera**” is a Codex divided into 4 parts. It has 458 illustrated pages and 136 drawings. In the cover, there is an illustration of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores (Our Lady of Pains) , patron saint of the ill and it is dated “Year 1710” at the bottom. The first three parts refer to Botanic terminology, properties of the plants, harvest and conservation times, their curative virtues, and how to benefit from them. This is followed by several indexes, including the name of said plants in Tupí – Guaraní. The whole of Part Four is a medical study of the illnesses cured by means of these herbs, roots and barks, beginning with Las Virtudes del Árbol de la Yerba (The Virtues of the Herb Tree). Besides, Father Montenegro describes the similarity in some cases of native plants with European plants and how to prepare them to obtain effective cure for different diseases. Beautiful drawings made in India ink and nib pen, illustrate as well as enrich this hard and invaluable work.

As regards Segismundo Asperger ’s work, the content of each one of the plants he describes, **is an exact and textual copy** of Father Montenegro’s manuscript. In most of the cases, the information is incomplete, since he sometimes transcribes only what appeared as virtues in *Materia Médica Misionera* and in other cases he copies the entire information as regards the corresponding vegetal. Besides, Asperger changes the order in which the plants are described, since he begins his manuscript with a Proem, followed by the description of the Virtues of Cacao.

The Jesuitical Catalogs from 1703, 1715, 1720 and 1724 mention Brother Montenegro’s bad health, due to thisis, which he himself cured thanks to the virtues of the guayacán, which he describes, indicating in his work the magistral prescription. It is remarkable to notice that in Asperger’s work, when he describes the guayacán, he did not eliminate the paragraph Montenegro wrote, citing his disease, how to catch it and the way to cure it

The copy was astute since, for example, when he mentions the Mechoacán or the Jalapa, among other plants, he omits to include “drawn here” or “I here exemplify with a drawing”, as they appear in *Materia Médica Misionera*, since Segismundo Asperger’s work has no drawings, as mentioned before. Nevertheless, Asperger’s work does not finish with the plants included in Montenegro’s work. In the end, he has included reference about Red Quina, Yellow Quina and White Quina (Peruvian bark, Chinchona bark), and other plants which are not mentioned in *Materia Médica Misionera* ,possibly because they are not native to the Missions in which Montenegro acted, but which had been studied and described among others by Martin Dobrizhoffer in his work *Avipones History*. Dobrizhoffer was Asperger’s companion in said native town.

As per what has been stated above, I agree with N. Arata’s affirmations in the sense that Asperger’s work is a copy of Father Montenegro’s work. Unfortunately, I was not able to check the other manuscripts Arata used to carry out his work since said manuscripts are not to be found.

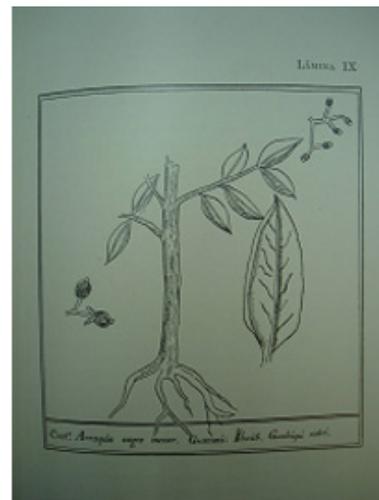
Until a similar manuscript, dated before 1710 is found, Jesuit Father Pedro Montenegro deserves the right to be considered the author of the first Herbarium or **Materia Médica Misionera** which served as a model for the different copies made later on and which were known in different convents, schools and Missions to be used by the members of the church in their medical practices and medicinal preparations.

Father Furlong with good criterion comments:

“...Only the day when the different Medicine and Missionary Botanic Codices still unpublished come out, would we be able to appreciate the extend to which the authors were or were not original, since it is a fact that there was continuity in this activity on the part of the Jesuits, enlarging and correcting one another, in search of further and better improvements in reference to the curative needs of the time”.



“Notes on various things inherent in this province (Paraguay) extracted by Father S. Asperger former Jesuit of those missions in Uruguay and Félix de Azara” 31 de Mayo 1865



Arrayán sp, Añangapirí mirí, Guabiyú, Íbahú, Materia Médica Misionera (Missionary Medical Matters) F. Pedro de Montenegro, 1710



**Sangre de Drago, Ibirá caáberá,
Croton succirubrus**



**Jalapa o Xalapa, Caá lambi
Ipomoea purga**

Materia Médica Misionera (Missionary Medical Matters) F. Pedro de Montenegro, 1710

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