

Branded by Fire: Treatment of *Primeros Libros*

The Cushing Memorial Library and Archives of Texas A&M University contains 20 examples of volumes designated as *primeros libros* and forms the basis of an international collaboration of nearly 30 institutions to build a digital humanities collection available for research (<http://www.primeroslibros.org>). *Primeros libros* are books first printed in the Americas from approximately 1539 to 1605 in colonial Mexico and Peru. The printing presses in New Spain functioned as a powerful instrument of the Spanish Crown and Catholic Church. Ascetic works, doctrines/catechisms, grammars, and dictionaries primarily fueled the printing press as well as the occasional medical, scientific, military or literary work.

These Texas A&M University volumes are previously untreated and several are in need of intense conservation treatment to bring them back as functional research tools while preserving their significance as unique artifacts. They are part of the Colonial Mexican Collection, which contains thousands of works either produced in Mexico or European imprints concerning Mexico during the Age of Exploration, Colonial, and early National periods, and is a significant collecting area for the library as well as resource for the scholarly community in this area. The collection offers a significant number of examples of Mexican colonial bindings, woodcuts, illustrations, illuminated and decorated manuscripts, types, publishers, marginalia, and other information.

This presentation reviewed the unique characteristics of *primeros libros*, such as the *marca de fuego* (burned in brand) that is usually present on the textblock edge of these books, while also relating them to their more common European cousins in areas such as printing and binding methods and materials used. Other *primeros libros* that had been

previously treated before coming into the A&M collection were reviewed for durability of repairs in high-use research collections, aging characteristics of the repair materials, and appropriate aesthetic outcome of the overall treatment. Several book models were made to test methods for reconstruction of a *marca de fuego* and to test materials.

One *primero libro*, Benito Fernandez's 1568 work, *Doctrina Chistiana en Lengua*, was selected to serve as a case study for treatment to be carried out on other items within this collection.

The *Doctrina Christiana* was chosen as the case study because of the scarcity of the title and the severity of its condition. The item exhibited a mostly detached parchment wrapper with severe moisture damage and overall shrinkage, as well as severe pest damage and paper loss of the first signature, with staining and tidelines throughout the textblock. For binding structure strategies, several approaches were considered to address the diverse needs of the volume, from parchment repair for the binding to a completely new binding of the same structure, but ultimately it was decided to implement a reversible "medium solution" of an unattached sympathetic parchment wrapper, while reutilizing the original sewing supports and sewing thread. This treatment method stabilized the object materials, made it a functional research tool again, and maintained original materials in their original orientation for future research.

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