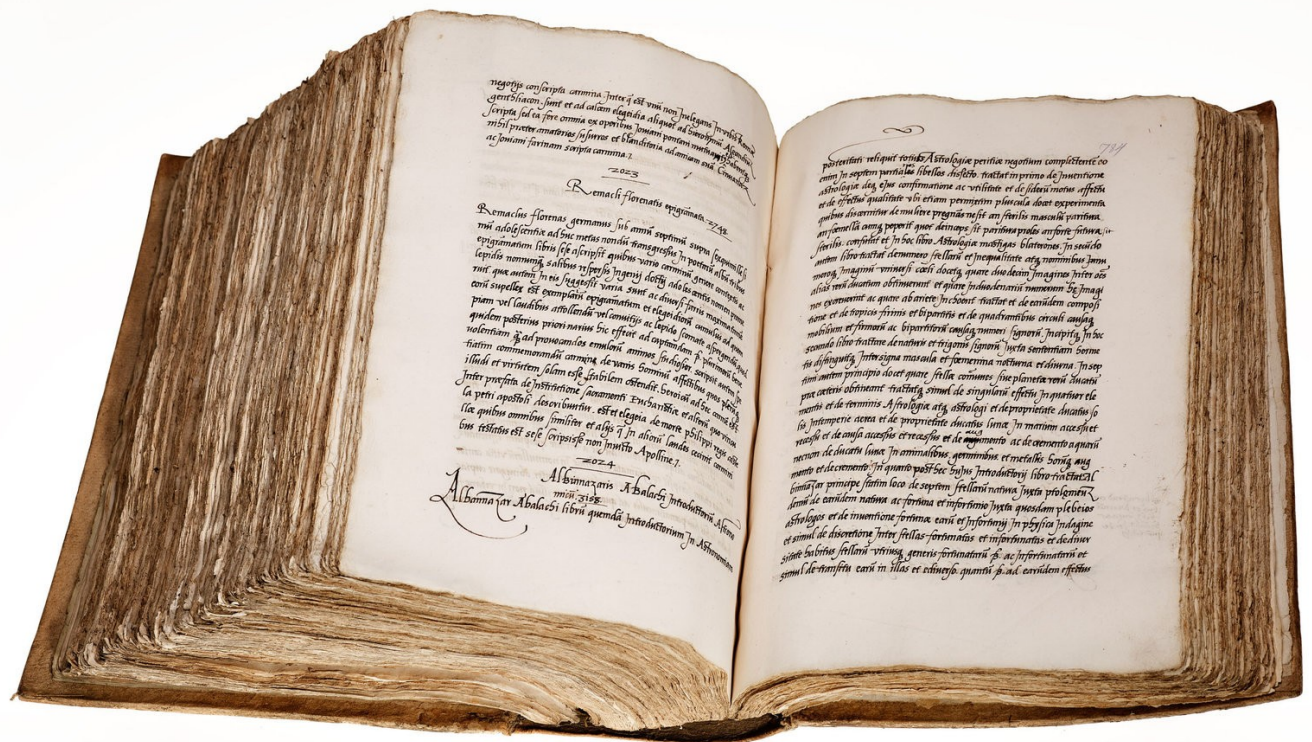


Christopher Columbus' Son Had An Enormous Library. Its Catalog Was Just Found

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[ARI SHAPIRO](#)



The *Libro de los Epítomes*, a guidebook to the 16th century library of Hernando Colón, recently turned up in a manuscript archive in Denmark.

It's the stuff of a Hollywood blockbuster: Five hundred years ago, a son of Christopher Columbus assembled one of the greatest libraries the world has ever known. The volumes inside were mostly lost to history. Now, a precious book summarizing the contents of the library has turned up in a manuscript collection in Denmark.

The newly discovered manuscript is "an absolutely gorgeous thing," says Edward Wilson-Lee, author of *The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books* — a biography of Columbus' son Hernando Colón. "It's about the size of a coffee table book. It's almost a foot thick. It's 2,000 pages long in beautifully, beautifully clear handwriting."

The reference volume, called the *Libro de los Epítomes*, was designed to help a user find books in the enormous library.

Colón was "looking for the Google algorithm of print," Wilson-Lee explains: "How to take vast amounts of information and make something usable out of it."

Interview Highlights

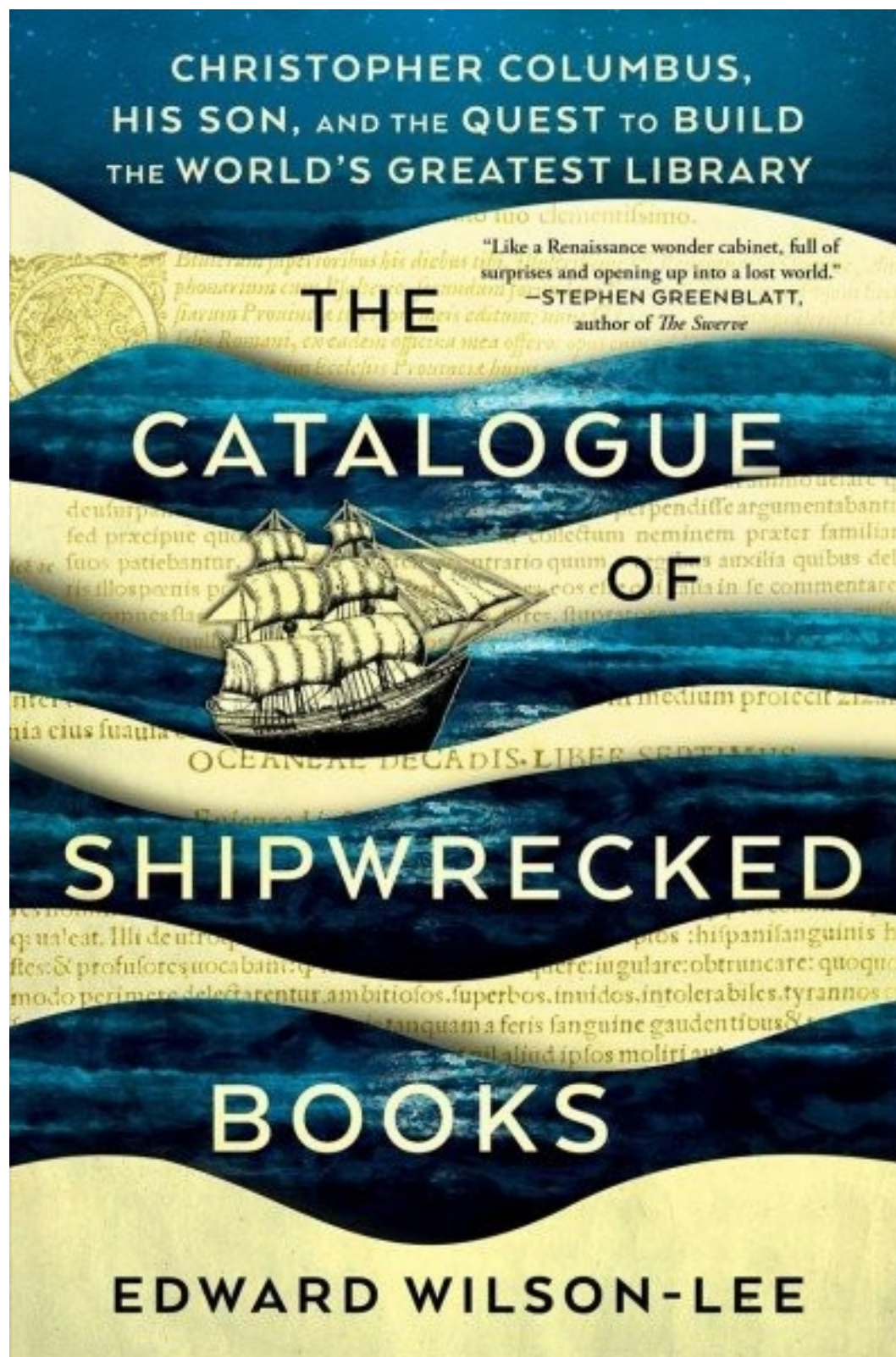
On Hernando Colón

Hernando was the second out-of-wedlock son of Christopher Columbus. He was born of an affair that Columbus had when he was kicking around the Spanish court still waiting for the patronage that would launch his voyage westward. Because the voyage in 1492 was successful, Hernando grew up with a fair amount of power and privilege — but because he was born out of wedlock, he never quite gained the levels of prominence that his father did.

But he always wanted to prove himself his father's son in spirit. And so he undertook this bizarre, extraordinary project to build a universal library that would have every book in the world in it. And he very much saw this as a counterpart to his father's desire to circumnavigate the world. So Hernando was going to build a universal library that would circumnavigate the world of knowledge.

On the newly discovered volume

One of the things that Hernando realized was that collecting every book in the world — and this was during the early age of print when the number of books was accelerating rapidly — collecting all these books wouldn't really be very useful if you didn't have some way to organize and distill them all. So he paid an army of readers to essentially read every book in the library and distill it down to a short summary so that this enormous library could be at the disposal of a single person who would be able to control it.



This book, the *Libro de los Epítomes*, which contained the summary of the books in the library, is mentioned in an account of the library by his last librarian. And then it goes missing shortly after Hernando's death in 1539 and isn't really heard of for almost 500 years, until about three weeks ago — it turned up in a library in Copenhagen.

On how this volume got "lost"

This collection [in which it was found] in Denmark [the Arnemagnæan Collection at the University of Copenhagen] is mostly a collection of Icelandic manuscripts, and it's got a very small number of books that are not Icelandic — but because they are not Icelandic, people weren't really that interested in them. So this is really a story of a book that was lost in the library, almost, because it was put on the wrong shelf.

The person who collected this collection ... Arni Magnusson, appears to have bought Hernando's manuscript as part of a group of manuscripts because he wanted some of the other manuscripts in the same group. So it sat in this collection ... and no one really knew what it was until Hernando's story started to become slightly more widely known, and they realized what they were holding.

On what we can learn from the summaries

The most exciting thing about this is that many of the books that it summarizes will be books that are lost in every other form. Hernando was, in many ways, a kind of crazed visionary — like his father. Whilst most other book collectors of the day were collecting dusty old manuscripts of Plato and Cicero, Hernando was one of the few people to see the real potential of print.

And so he was going around collecting all of the kind of throwaway things that [were] really changing the world — so, early newspapers and weather reports and things like that — and bringing them back to his library. So this *Libro de los Epitomes* will capture for us the world of early print in ways that ... are often lost.

On learning this volume had been discovered — after writing an entire book about this ancient library



Colón's guide to his massive personal library contains summaries of around 2,000 books.

I spent six years living every day with Hernando — his whole story is fantastic. But ... there are some small pieces of the library which were considered to be lost forever. ...

I was actually sitting on a beach in Kenya, where I grew up, at the time [of the discovery] and I got an email about it and I just about dropped the phone in the ocean. ... I didn't want to let myself believe it was real until I actually got to Copenhagen and there was really no doubt. It has his hand all over it, and it's confirmable in any number of ways. ... It was shockingly exciting.

On what happens now

There's a project underway to digitize the manuscript and to transcribe it. It'll be translated for everyone whose 16th century Latin isn't that sharp, and it'll be made available to the public. ... It'll probably take five or seven years to actually get all of that done. So there's a lot of work to be done in identifying which books are in there and which ones are lost in every other form. ... But it'll eventually be made available to the public and contribute further to this fantastically exciting story.

On what he hopes to learn from the *Libro de losEpítomes*

The major question about the library which this book will help us to answer is how the exponentially rising amount of information during the age of print changed the way people organize knowledge about the world. ... This will just get us that much closer to seeing how all of this information that wouldn't have circulated publicly before changed his ways of thinking about the world.