

## Ortus sanitatis

Rare Books Collection, University of Melbourne Library



Ortus sanitatis (or Hortus sanitatis)  
Mainz: Jacob Meydenbach, 1491  
George McArthur Bequest, 1903  
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The *Ortus sanitatis* (also known as the *Hortus sanitatis*) or 'Garden of health' was one of the first natural history encyclopaedias published following the European invention of moveable type and the printing press. The University of Melbourne's copy is imperfect, containing only 386 leaves out of 454, but includes several hundred delightful woodcuts, the two original indexes, and a large number of interesting annotations written in a slightly later hand.

From the time it was issued, the *Ortus* was a popular success, and was quickly reprinted in several editions, including early translations produced for the English and French markets. The book's influence was wide, and it became a standard reference work in the early modern period on plants, animals and minerals, and their corresponding medicinal properties – in effect encapsulating in one volume the scientific knowledge of the time. Of particular interest are the treatise on medical applications of urine; the inclusion of mythical flora and fauna – mermaids and mermen, myrmecoleons, basilisks, mandrake men and the basor tree – which are described as actual creatures and plants; and the incorporation of medieval bestiary tales such as the story of the phoenix.

## Teaching ideas

The University of Melbourne's curriculum is rich and varied, and changes from year to year. For more teaching ideas, [contact a collection manager](#).

### **The Medieval Image: Art and Culture**

Analyse the mythical plants and creatures illustrated in the woodcuts and described in the text for insights into late 15th-century understanding and interpretations of the natural and supernatural worlds. Examine representations of real and imagined flora and animals and compare these with modern renditions, to hypothesise on the philosophical influences that shaped medieval image-making.

### **The Power of Ideas: Ten Great Books**

Explore critical traditions of thought through history by examining printed books in the Rare Books Collection, to develop an appreciation for the power of creative expression and ideas.

### **From Plato to Einstein**

Explore late 15th-century scientific thought by closely examining a natural science encyclopaedia of the period. Observe what kind of knowledge was included; study how phenomena were depicted, described and classified; and reflect on the philosophical connections between real and imagined worlds.

### **A History of Nature**

Examine how human knowledge and understanding were organised and presented in this early scientific encyclopaedia. Explore varied themes such as the preparation and application of natural remedies, the spiritual qualities of minerals, the use of mythical tales to explain natural events, and the interplay between magical and scientific forces in the overall world view.

### **Magic, Reason, New Worlds, 1450–1750**

Step into the 15th-century mindset through a first-hand encounter with a natural history compendium from the period. Study the interplay between mythical and scientific knowledge of the world as revealed in the text and images, and consider how the forces of magic and reason were fundamental to, and informed, the late medieval world view.

### **History 4A**

Gain an understanding of how nature, the environment, disease, birth and death were viewed and responded to in the later medieval period, by examining this encyclopaedia of the natural realm. Compare and contrast 15th-century European responses to the natural world, and ways of explaining occurrences by way of a combination of myth, alchemy and science.

### **History of Books and Reading**

Discover how medieval compendiums proved a popular technology for recording, ordering and disseminating information about the known world, helping to cultivate an emerging reading public. Understand the repercussions of changing technologies and production processes in the late medieval period, and appreciate at first hand the evolving principles of typography and illustration and their complementary roles in book design.

## Intersecting objects



John Parkinson (English, 1567–1650)

**Theatrum botanicum: The theater of plants. Or, An herball of a large extent ...**

London: Thomas Cotes, 1640

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Carolus Clusius (Flemish, 1526–1609)

**Caroli Clusii Atrebat. Rariorum aliquot stirpium per Hispanias observatarum historia: libris duobus expressa**

Antwerp: Christophe Plantin, 1576

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To learn more, visit the website of the [Rare Books Collection](#).

## References

Christopher Harrington, '[A medieval beetle in the Rare Books Collection](#)', *University of Melbourne Library collections blog*, 16 May 2016.

Louise Wilson & Robyn Sloggett, '[Hortus sanitatis \(The garden of health\)](#)', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 1, November 2007, p. 13.