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Indelible Images: New World Tattoos in Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's *Historia general* (1535-1549)

El historiador español Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557) es uno de los primeros europeos que escribe sobre el tatuaje tal y como lo observó en la sociedad indígena americana. Al intentar entender este fenómeno cultural busca tradiciones parecidas al otro lado del océano, específicamente los tatuajes moriscos y también la práctica de herrar esclavos. Sin embargo, sobre todo, Oviedo utiliza su conocimiento de la cultura cortesana de la época para interpretar la función del tatuaje en el Nuevo Mundo.

Palabras clave: *tatuaje, Oviedo, herrar, cultura cortesana*

The Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557) is one of the first Europeans to write about the tattoo as he observed it in the native societies of the Americas. In his attempts to understand this cultural phenomenon, he looks toward similar traditions overseas, namely Morisco tattoos and the practice of branding slaves. However, above all, Oviedo uses his knowledge of Spain's courtly culture to interpret the function of the tattoo in the New World.

Keywords: *tattoo, Oviedo, branding, courtly culture*

Although it was only in the final decades of the eighteenth century that the word "tattoo" acquired meaning as a mark or design on the skin, the neologism described a practice with roots that went much deeper. Centuries prior to the publication of Admiral Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's and Captain James Cook's accounts of their Polynesian voyages, in which they introduced readers to the "tataou" or "tattow," others had long expressed a similar interest in the markings they observed on native bodies (Dauge-Roth 121; Fleming 88). These corporeal practices were most documented in North America and the Philippines. Throughout the second half of the sixteenth century, European observers recorded these customs extensively in both text and image in their respective overseas colonies.[1]

While these accounts differ from one another in the geographies they cover and the languages in which they are written, their approximations to

indigenous corporeal markings reveal widespread similarities. Invoking comparisons between the tattoo and the process of working, cutting, or carving a material; the craft of embroidery; and stamping or branding, witnesses to these practices drew on familiar cultural frameworks to make understood foreign traditions (Kroupa 1273-74; Odle 19). At the same time, these observers share in the knowledge that similar encounters have been documented by others in different parts of the world. In *Description des moeurs des souriquoises comparées à celles d'autres peuples* (1609), Marc Lescarbot (1570-1641) mentions the inhabitants of Brazil alongside those of Florida and Virginia as nations known to mark their skin (Dauge-Roth 125). Models were sought in the ancient world as well. In his discussion of Visayan tattoos, the Jesuit missionary Francisco Colin compares contemporary tattooing practices in Brazil and Florida to those of the ancient Britons and Scythians (Kroupa 1282-83). Indeed, early modern observers often sought precedents for such overseas traditions in places closer to home: in addition to the Britons, Picts and Pictons – ancient inhabitants of regions in England and France, respectively – were referenced in these discussions (Dauge-Roth 146).

Despite the wide range of examples these accounts enlist to demonstrate the universality of the tattoo, they are strangely silent regarding the first eyewitness accounts of this phenomenon in the Americas. The fact remains, however, that decades prior to the first French and English colonizing efforts in North America, Spanish colonists had already experienced this form of body art among diverse indigenous populations, including the Maya, the Chontal of Nicaragua and, to a lesser extent, the Aztecs. Some of these natives were taken to Europe, where they were exposed to the curious gaze of courtly onlookers. As early as 1501, the Italian diplomat Alberto Cantino wrote of the arrival in Lisbon of individuals from Newfoundland who had facial tattoos (Koslofsky 97). Most early impressions of Amerindian tattoos, however, were recorded in situ, by friars and colonists who witnessed them firsthand and who could make inquiries as to their meaning.

In *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (1566), Diego de Landa (1524-1579) writes in relation to the Maya that those individuals who tattoo themselves are seen as courageous because of the pain entailed in inscribing images on the skin (76). Other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish sources also mention tattooing among the Maya in the Yucatan (Koslofsky 97; Thompson 250). Perhaps the most well-known anecdote is that of Gonzalo Guerrero, a shipwrecked Spanish sailor enslaved by his Mayan captors who is said to have "[gone] native" to the point of transforming his physical appearance via tattoos and other forms of body decoration (Adorno 232). Although Guerrero is but a literary invention, the character has had an

enduring legacy in Latin American letters after first being introduced in several different accounts of the conquest of Mexico in the mid-sixteenth century (220).[2] With respect to the Aztecs, the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) remarks on isolated incidents of tattooing that he witnessed. Other forms of body decoration, such as costumes and body painting, appear to have been more widespread (Dehouve 356). In contrast, and as we will see shortly, in the circum-Caribbean the Spanish interacted with indigenous communities for whom the tattoo functioned as an intrinsic component of individual and collective sociopolitical identity.

It is not within the scope of this article to hypothesize as to why Spanish encounters with indigenous tattooing practices during the first half of the sixteenth century were overlooked in contemporary historiography of the same.[3] Whatever the reason, this omission has had unintended consequences regarding scholarship on the tattoo in the early modern world.[4] Academic interest regarding this topic has tended to reproduce the limiting gaze of its sources; that it to say, scholarship has focused primarily on French and English perceptions of the tattoo in North America and Europe,[5] as well as those of the Spanish in the Philippines.[6] Yet, the extant corpus of writing exploring the Amerindian tattoo in the circum-Caribbean world is of the utmost importance to understanding later Europeans encounters with this phenomenon in the early modern period. These first documented observations of tattooing practices in Europe's overseas colonies shed light on how colonists initially conceived of this body art, as well as how these impressions changed over time and in response to the varied circumstances of European conquest and colonization.

Crucial to this forgotten corpus are the writings of the Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478-1557), the earliest witness to document the custom of tattooing among the native peoples in several mainland provinces of Central and South America.[7] His observations to what he refers to as corporeal *pinturas* or "paintings" in the *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1535-1549)[8] represent the most extensive colonial-era account of tattoo in these regions and also number among the most comprehensive descriptions of similar practices at large in the early modern world.[9] As such, they constitute an essential backdrop to recent scholarly efforts to chart the diverse experiences of British, Spanish, and French colonists with this indigenous body art in other parts of the world. Like later accounts of these practices, Oviedo's musings on the tattoo reflect a widespread European fascination with its multifaceted meaning in indigenous society and the implications of its permanence on the body.

As much as the tattoo set the Amerindian body apart from its European counterpart, Oviedo verbalized his encounters with this phenomenon in ways that resonated with his prior experiences on the Iberian Peninsula.

Unlike later French and English observers of the practice, who often compared tattooing with writing, Oviedo does not equate these two mediums. Instead, he establishes parallels between Spanish military and familial insignia and indigenous skin markings (Kroupa 1279). Having spent the final decade of the fifteenth century as a page (*mozo de cámara*) at the court of Queen Isabel and King Ferdinand, Oviedo was well schooled in the norms of usage of coats-of-arms and devices as signs of power, prestige, and identity in early modern Spain. Indeed, the topic was of such interest to him that he wrote two volumes of an unfinished heraldic treatise titled *Libro del Blasón* (1528); coats-of-arms and other insignia also figure prominently in his genealogical treatise *Batallas y quinquagenas* (1535-1557) (Carrillo Castillo 138). Above all, it is the latter project that offers a valuable perspective from which to consider Oviedo's approach to the New World tattoo.[10] The treatise, which Oviedo wrote contemporaneous with the *Historia general*, takes shape as a dialogue between an elderly warden, the Alcaide, and his younger interlocutor, Sereno. The Alcaide eagerly shares with his listener what he knows of the individuals highlighted in the work, paying particular attention to the insignia associated with them and their families. In the *Historia general*, Oviedo employs his understanding of these visual symbols of courtly culture to inform his observations of the New World tattoo. At the same time, the indelible nature of the tattoo on the skin poses new and startling considerations for the Spanish historian.

A novelty for readers of the *Historia general*, Oviedo gives a detailed account of the tattoo in the mainland provinces of Castilla del Oro, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, starting with the materials and mechanics involved in its creation. He explains that a black pigment, *tile*, is sprinkled into a cut made by a stone knife or cactus spine. When healed, this cut becomes a permanent mark in the skin, forever after attesting to the moment when blood merged with carbon.[11] According to Oviedo, the source of *tile* is a pine tree that grows on Hispaniola and in parts of the mainland. Recounting his experiences among the Chontal in Nicaragua (1527-1529), Oviedo explains that *tile* is the carbonic byproduct collected from burning the tree's resin, which is then stored in bundles of leaves. Those who manufacture *tile* take it to market, or the *tianguez*, where they barter it for other goods or for almonds, which were exchanged as currency. Since Oviedo does not attribute any other purpose to the *tile*, its value as a commodity suggests that the Chontal held the art of tattooing in high esteem. Oviedo too recognized the skill and artistry inherent in the material foundations of the tattoo, comparing the *tile*'s black powder with the pigments that painters use for oil painting.[12] Of those who execute the carving of the tattoo on the body, Oviedo writes, "hay maestros para ello, e muy diestros, que viven de eso" (*Historia general* 4: 365).

While Oviedo's knowledge of courtly culture on the peninsula is his primary vehicle for understanding the function of skin markings in indigenous society, it is not the only one. He also draws parallels between the New World tattoo and the body arts of North African tribes, writing, "estos indios usan unas pinturas en sus mismas carnes, cortando e pintando con tinta negra tales cortaduras o figuras, así como los africanos e otras naciones lo hacen" (*Historia general* 3: 60). Oviedo qualifies this comparison by describing what he understands to be the primarily aesthetic nature of North African skin designs, specifically among the Moorish women in Mauritania who tattoo themselves "para bien parescer" (*Historia general* 3: 60). Unlike their New World equivalent, in Oviedo's estimation North African skin markings do not have sociocultural meaning beyond their decorative function. Having never travelled to Africa himself, it is possible Oviedo saw designs executed in henna on Moriscas – Muslim women who had converted to Christianity – in Spain. Despite the Crown's efforts to legislate Muslim dress, Moriscas continued to wear tunics and leggings and to adorn themselves with henna. The extent to which these body markings would have been visible outside of the domestic sphere is subject to speculation, however. Though Oviedo mentions that they appear on the women's face, throat and "otras partes" (*Dela natural hystoria* xviii), in public Morisca women often wore the *almalafa*, a long, white garment that veiled them from view and which presumably would have prevented their skin from being visible (Harris 22).[13]

Alternatively, Oviedo could have learned about this North African practice through more indirect means. In 1550, the Italian traveler writer Giovanni Battista Ramusio (1485-1557) published the first volume of *Delle navigationi et viaggi*, which included diverse accounts translated to Italian of voyages to Africa, India, and the Spice Islands.[14] Scholar Daymond Turner conjectures that Oviedo owned this work, albeit he would have received the volume at a moment when he no longer had access to the manuscript of the *Historia general* (177). (In 1549, prior to embarking for the New World for the last time before his death, Oviedo left this document in a monastery in Spain in the ultimately dashed hopes of seeing it published in his lifetime.) Nevertheless, numerous sources that Ramusio used, among them Leo Africanus' *Cosmographia et geographia de Affrica* and Alvise Cadamosto's and Pedro de Sintra's reports of their journeys to West Africa, circulated or were published prior to appearing in Ramusio's work. It is possible that Oviedo read them, or perhaps received information they contained from his correspondence with Ramusio.[15] Certainly, Leo Africanus' comments regarding the practice of painting the skin among "[Arabian] damsels" and "women of Barberie" correspond to Oviedo's understanding of this body art in Mauritania (159-160).[16] So too, Cadamosto describes how Senegambian

women “work designs upon their flesh with the point of a needle … they are made with fire, so that they never disappear” (70). In general, body art and scarification – which could take the form of a tattoo or a different type of incision – were widespread practices in West Africa and other parts of the continent as markers of ethnic identity (Bryant 67).

The decorative tattoos of North African women are the only explicit comparison that Oviedo makes to the Amerindian tattoo in the *Historia general*. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that Oviedo’s observations regarding the use of the tattoo to mark enslaved bodies in certain indigenous communities would have reminded him of similar practices in early modern Europe.[17] The branding of slaves was a tradition stretching back to the Greco-Roman world; Oviedo and his readers likely would not have been surprised to learn that other cultures, too, had ways of visually identifying the subjugated body.[18] In the various autobiographical details that Oviedo shares of his early life in Spain (1478-1513), he does not mention having owned any slaves.[19] Nevertheless, branded bodies would have been common sight in sixteenth-century Castile, and particularly in Seville, which had the second largest slave population in Europe (van Deusen 9).[20] The scholar Nancy E. van Deusen describes the myriad forms these brands took as well as their diverse placement on the body, attesting to the ubiquity of this practice as well as the cosmopolitan nature of the city:

> The branded flesh of cheeks, foreheads, chins, or lips served as a readily identifiable text to be read at a glance … A face or an arm might be marked with a fleur-de-lis, a star, an S beside a nail (*clavo*) to spell out *esclavo* (slave), or a large X to signify the shape of the cross on which Saint Andrew was martyred. A face from Seville might say ‘DSA’ – *de Sevilla*. Diverse West African peoples might bear the mark of the Crown on their right breast or the particular brand of a trading company on their backs, whereas slaves from Portuguese India were branded on the face. (138)

Oviedo was well acquainted with Seville, the port from which all voyages to the New World embarked. He departed from this city on his way to the Caribbean and returned there five times over the course of his lifetime. The marks he would have witnessed on slave bodies – brands as well as others that some black Africans had received before arriving in Europe and which represented forms of tribal identification and adornment – would have been a familiar sight, a result of the long-standing historic ties between Spain and North Africa as well as the growing Portuguese slave trade (Lowe 22; Phillips 75).

The practice of branding bodies extended to Spain’s overseas colonies, where it was applied in varying measures to both black and indigenous peoples. Although in 1502 Queen Isabel had ruled that New World natives

were not infidels and so could not be enslaved as the Moors had been, other reasons provided sufficient justification to force hundreds and thousands of them into captivity.[21] King Ferdinand authorized the use of the brand in the Caribbean as early as 1511, ostensibly to distinguish the free Taínos of Hispaniola from slaves brought to the island from the Lucayas (Sauer 159; van Deusen 134). (Several years earlier the Spanish Crown had deemed the Lucayas unproductive lands, thereby justifying the legal capture of their inhabitants.) Many natives placed in bondage were branded with a G, in reference to their just capture in war (*guerra*), or an R (*rescate*), which signaled their prior status as slaves in native communities (van Deusen 134). Oviedo would have been intimately acquainted with this process: his first appointment in the New World was as a notary of mines and crime and judge of branding natives (*escribano mayor de minas, del crimen, y juzgado del herrar los indios*), and he received a commission for every individual branded (Bolaños 591).[22]

Oviedo does not explicitly query the connections between the Amerindian tattoo and the brand in the *Historia general*. However, his use of the verb "herrar" (to brand) to describe the act in native communities of marking slave bodies indicates his nuanced understanding of the New World tattoo. In contrast, Oviedo refers to the same process being enacted on the bodies of indigenous elites as "painting" ("se pintar"). This distinction is most clearly illustrated when Oviedo explains that the *tile* or soot is used "para *herrar* indios por esclavos con aquella invención que a sus amos les paresce, y también para *se pintar* por gala otros" (*Historia general* 1: 177). Regardless of whether its bearer is a slave or a prince, the same instruments and method are used to inscribe the tattoo into the skin; nevertheless, its social meaning varies depending on the individual in question. Oviedo's linguistic choices convey two diametrically opposed visions of life: one of pain and servitude, and the other of luxury and pleasure.

Oviedo's need to differentiate between these two applications of the tattoo points to a unique feature of this New World custom, which set it apart from similar European traditions. As a tool used for a variety of purposes, it was not automatically viewed negatively, as was the brand in Europe; the tattoo could just as soon celebrate one's accomplishments as it could signal one's social marginality. As Oviedo describes the practice in the province of Castilla del Oro among the Cueva, it appears that many individuals might have sported at least one tattoo on their bodies, as a mark identifying their status as either a freeman or a slave. He explains that slaves are branded with the mark of their servitude on the face, above the mouth. Conversely, tattoos placed on any other part of the body, namely the chest, arms, and the face below the mouth, signal one's liberty.[23] Female body markings are a notable omission to Oviedo's account of the tattoo in Castilla

del Oro; it is possible that this corporeal art was practiced by both sexes, but that female tattooing was of little interest to Oviedo, just as it was for the English in North America (Odle 51).

Whatever the case may be, the focus of Oviedo's account of the tattoo among the Cueva is its political function. The Spanish historian relates that when a ruler assumes power, he chooses a design – what Oviedo calls a "devisa" – to represent his reign. Since servants assume the same markings as their sovereign, these tattoos act as a kind of corporal record forever linking the ruler to those who served him.[24] They also put on display the continuity or discontinuity of one reign with another, a process which can lead to tensions within the ruling family. Oviedo explains that heirs to the throne must decide whether to adopt the same markings as their fathers – thereby ensuring the latter's legacy – or to elect new ones. Such circumstances are ripe for conflict, as those who "no se pintan, porque tienen esperanza de mudar la devisa e tomar la que les paresciere … son siempre odiosos a sus padres porque no se pintan de su devisa, o los que toman la marca o devisa del padre, en sus días, quiérelos mucho" (*Historia general* 3: 324). As an irrefutable demonstration of the will of its bearer, the tattoo in Castilla del Oro operates as a political apparatus with weighty consequences.

By using the word "devisa" to describe the tattoo as an instrument of rule, Oviedo draws on his knowledge of the material signs of power and identity as visible in early modern Spain. The namesake of its Amerindian equivalent, the personal device was employed by Spanish aristocracy to showcase its moral values, personal accomplishments, and aspirations. It often consisted of two components – an image accompanied by a series of verses[25] – which, once chosen, were then advertised and circulated in courtly circles. Unlike coats-of-arms, whose use was strictly regulated by the Crown, and which theoretically had to adhere to certain standards, devices were not governed by any such rules and so could be adopted or discarded at will (Martínez Llorente 173). In his genealogical treatise, *Batallas y quinquagenas*, Oviedo describes and interprets these devices based on his knowledge of the person in question.[26] Although their use was primarily restricted to individuals, Oviedo refers to instances in which families appear to have adopted a relative's personal device as a collective sign of identity: "Algunas casas las perpetúan y no las mudan, y otros no se curan deso, sino toman la inbención que les place" (1: 57).

Oviedo's decision to refer to the tattoos of Cuevan rulers as "devisas" highlights what he considers an essential characteristic of both the New-World and Old-World traditions: their voluntary nature. Notwithstanding the potential consequences of a prince inaugurating his reign with a new design, it is a choice he is free to make, just as devices in Spain are

"voluntarias, y las toman y mudan y ponen por cimera a beneplácito" (1: 57). Similarly, even though the tattoo and the personal device can be perpetuated among various generations, neither represents a family at large but rather the individual bearer. The implicit analogy between the two phenomena allows Oviedo to explore the New World tattoo as a manifestation of a familiar concept, subject to the same courtly language that he employs to describe the visual and material displays of sociopolitical identity in *Batallas y quinquagenas*.

At the same time, the tattoo's permanence lends a momentous weight to this cultural practice, missing from its Old-World counterpart. Whereas personal devices among Spanish elite could easily be replaced or exchanged for others, the decision to carve a particular design onto the skin was not easily undone. Once a prince makes the decision to adopt the device of his father, Oviedo remarks, "después no la puede mudar ni menguar ni crescer en ella, porque lo ternían por malo e mentiroso a su padre, e no le darían crédito en nada" (*Historia general* 3: 324). A tattoo represents a kind of visual pledge on the part of its bearer to honor his predecessor and a display of his moral rectitude. No changes can be made to it without compromising the prince in the eyes of the populace; an indelible mark, the tattoo is as much a sign of identity as it is a way to hold rulers accountable for their actions.

Oviedo's understanding of the function of the tattoo in Venezuela, as per the testimony of Rodrigo de Bastida, is similarly informed by his notions of courtly life in early modern Spain. Whereas Oviedo associates the tattoos in Castilla del Oro with rulership, in Venezuela he takes them to be representative of one's military rank. Depending on their placement on the body, these tattoos signal the degree of a warrior's success on the battlefield. Oviedo explains that novice fighters are tattooed first from the wrist to the tips of the fingers; if they continue to perform well, more tattoos are place from the wrist to the elbow and the elbow to the shoulder, then in ascending segments from the waist to the stomach, chest, throat, mouth, eyes, and forehead.[27] Those who achieve the highest military rank – the equivalent to a Fernán González or Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, Spanish heroes of old – are covered, waist-up, in tattoos, and in addition wear necklaces made of human bones and capes of tiger fur.[28] Oviedo likens this practice to the awarding of titles of nobility in Spain, explaining that the different tattoos are the equivalent to ascending "de hidalgo a caballero, e de caballero a conde o marqués, e de marqués a duque, y de duque a príncipe, etc." (*Historia general* 3: 60). Both cultural practices celebrate and reward actions taken for the benefit of the state.

Yet the permanence of the tattoo demands complete adherence to social dictates: according to Oviedo, "ninguno tiene nescesidad ni atrevimiento de se anticipar ni pintar en esos grados, sino procediendo la

orden general que es dicho" (*Historia general* 3: 60). As public displays of honor and prestige, to misrepresent one's military record would risk shame or punishment. Analogous practices in early modern Spain, on the other hand, are plagued with such transgressions. The Alcaide complains repeatedly to Sereno in *Batallas y quinquagenas* of cases in which coats-of-arms are treated almost like personal devices, to be changed at will and without following the rules of heraldry or obtaining the needed royal authorization.[29] Taken to an extreme, the results of such blatant disregard of protocol are that "los plebeos e çibdadanos e gente no militar ni del gremio de la nobleza andan ya hinchados y adornados con escudos dorados e soberuias insignias, que tanto les pertenesçen como al puerco la silla" (Oviedo, *Batallas y quinquagenas* 1: 155). It is with a sense of admiration that Oviedo remarks on the natives' stringent social hierarchy and the very visible signs that determine one's place in it. At least from an outsider's perspective, this indigenous practice seems bereft of the corruption pervading similar displays in Spain. Oviedo's remonstrances concerning the abuses to which the rules of heraldry are subject is likely the first example of a recurring topic in early modern literature on the tattoo. Later French and English observers of body markings on indigenous bodies similarly understand them as "accurate and unfakable signs of one's accomplishments and status," in contrast to comparable displays in Europe whose impermanence lends itself to deceitful practices (Odle 53).

A common thread runs through all of Oviedo's explorations of the Amerindian tattoo: a fascination with the idea of the body as a human canvas for these designs. Time and again, Oviedo reflects on the permanent and inalterable nature of the tattoo, which sets it apart from what he identifies as comparable displays of sociopolitical identity in early modern Spain. A tattoo accompanies its wearer throughout life and into death: "que son pinturas que no se pueden quitar sino con morir o podrirse el cuerpo" (Oviedo, *Historia general* 2:418). From this perspective, the New World tattoo is the mirror opposite of its Old-World counterpart. At the same time as the materiality of the latter – in the form of jewelry, clothing, portrait medals, flags, and other objects – make these artifacts easily expendable and exchangeable, that they are divorced from the body they represent means that they celebrate the deeds of their owners long after death. Oviedo does not attribute any spiritual import to the tattoo's presence in death, though it is possible that it did have meaning as such. Writing a century later from the Philippines, the Jesuit missionary Francisco Ignacio Alcina (1610-1674) observes the need for decoration among the Visayan to ensure the safe passage of an individual to the afterlife; it is likely that he understood tattoos as numbering among such ornaments, just as they were in many other communities in Southeastern Asia (Kroupa 1280). In the Americas, too,

bodily adornment often had a spiritual significance; nevertheless, Oviedo approaches the Amerindian tattoo strictly as a reflection of the sociopolitical dynamics of a community.

Despite the notable differences between the Amerindian tattoo and courtly insignia in early modern Spain, Oviedo turns to the latter in his attempts to make sense of the former. The material trappings of life on the peninsula embody fundamental aspects of one's identity and lineage – through them, the Castilian elite put on display their social standing and most prized moral values. Oviedo recognizes similar factors at work in the tattoos of rulers and military leaders in Castilla del Oro and Venezuela. At the same time, the Amerindian tattoo challenged the way in which sociocultural divisions manifested themselves materially in Europe: in the New World, the same painful process of inscribing marks into the skin was used to brand a slave, assign leadership, or celebrate one's military accomplishments. These differences, however, pale in the face of the tattoo's permanence, which signaled toward a reality with no ready European courtly equivalent. Its durability, from the moment the black *tile* merged with the skin until after the death of its possessor, imbued this cultural practice with a sense of consequence lacking from comparable displays of identity on the peninsula. A society in which everyone knows their place is a far cry from the topsy-turvy courtly world that Oviedo criticizes in Spain.

Nota bene: Oviedo's inquiries into the material signs of sociopolitical identity have their counterpart in his use of illustration as a tool to make understood the subjects about which he writes. To accompany his biographical sketches of Spanish noblemen in *Batallas y quinquagenas*, often Oviedo includes a drawing of the individual's coat-of-arms and personal device. While Oviedo penned no illustrations of the New World tattoo, the numerous woodcuts and drawings of life in the Caribbean in the *Historia general* – the first of their kind to circulate in Europe – speak to the importance he gives to visual forms of expression.

His fascination with the visual medium has become our own: several of the woodcuts from the first edition of the *Historia general* (Seville, 1535) – the iguana and the pineapple, species endemic to the Americas – have become symbols of the novelties that these lands and its resources represented to early modern Europeans. While these images have been reproduced on many a page in books and scholarly articles, it is their presence on a more ephemeral medium – that of human flesh – that perhaps would have occasioned Oviedo's greatest surprise. I encountered one of these living canvases quite by happenstance when, at a restaurant in Cedar Falls, Iowa, I noticed a man at an adjacent table with a tattoo on his right upper arm that was oddly familiar to me. It was, in fact, a slightly modified

version of the woodcut of the prickly pear cactus from the *Historia general* (1535), which its bearer had acquired after seeing the work at an exhibition at the Library of Congress in 2016. A friend who had accompanied him on the trip had similarly been inspired to get a tattoo of Oviedo's celebrated pineapple. Almost 500 years after the publication of the *Historia* (1535), those same dark, permanent marks on the skin that so captivated Oviedo bear witness to his larger-than-life presence in our modern world.

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NOTES

1 Several of these illustrations circulated widely in Europe; images of tattooed individuals sketched by the artists John White (1539-1593) and Jacque le Moyne de Morgues (1533-1588) on their expeditions to Roanoke Island and Florida, respectively, were reimagined in several copper engravings in Theodor de Bry's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590). An engraving in de Bry's edition of Olivier van Noort's account of the circumnavigation of the world (1602) attests to Spanish encounters in the Philippines with this custom, as does a broadside printed in 1692 announcing the visit to London of the "Painted Prince," a native of the island of Miangas who had been purchased as a slave and whose body was completely covered in tattoos (Kroupa 1265).

2 The first literary mentions of this figure are Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo's and Francisco López de Gómara's accounts of the conquest of Mexico, written decades after these events took place. Oviedo's casting of Gonzalo as a warrior in *Historia general y natural de las Indias* (1535-1549) was taken up by Gómara in his *Historia de las Indias y la conquista de México* (1552), where the shipwreck survivor is dubbed, for the first time, Gonzalo Guerrero (Adorno 229-32).

3 There could be a variety of possible explanations for this omission, including the availability of these Spanish sources to a European readership and the degree and prevalence of the art of tattooing in South and Central America compared with North America and the Philippines.

4 These efforts are also hindered by the climatological circumstances in some of the circum-Caribbean regions that the Spanish colonized. The humidity of the sites where ancient Maya lived, for example, makes it difficult for archaeologists to study perishable organic materials such as cotton, wood, skin, and feathers (Tremain 67). Although these practices are documented in colonial-era sources, it is difficult to shed additional light on them via the tools of other scholarly disciplines.

5 Although skin markings were relatively uncommon in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, those used most frequently – penal branding, the witches mark, and stigmata – generally had a negative connotation (as Koslofsky observes, stigmata were originally a mark of punishment) (98).

6 The tattoo has been a growing source of scholarly interest over the past decade, in particular in the case of colonial North America. Katherine Dauge-Roth, Craig Koslofsky, and Mairin Odle demonstrate how skin markings – including but not limited to tattoos – were integral in the construction of identity in the early modern world. Sebestian Kroupa explores Spanish efforts to incorporate Visayan tattooed bodies within the colonial domain, even as they resisted such attempts. Earlier contributions to this topic include those of Gordon M. Sayre and Juliet Fleming.

7 Oviedo lived in several different places in the circum-Caribbean: on the island of Hispaniola, in Castilla del Oro – a mainland territory on the Caribbean coast of southern Central America and northwestern South America – , and Nicaragua. He attests to having witnessed the tattoo on the mainland, but not on Hispaniola. His comments regarding similar traditions in Venezuela are based on an oral report that he received from Rodrigo de Bastida.

8 The first edition of part 1 of the *Historia general* (books 1-19 as well as a book on shipwrecks) was published in 1535 in Seville. Oviedo spent the next fourteen years revising this published material as well as writing an additional part 2 and 3 to the work. Despite his best efforts, he was not able to see printed the complete *Historia general* in his lifetime. It was not until the nineteenth century that the three-part work was published (1851-1855) under the auspices of the Real Academia de la Historia, edited by the Spanish historian José Amador de los Ríos. This article cites from Juan Pérez de Tudela y Bueso's edition of the *Historia general* (1959), which, to a large extent, reproduces the editorial interventions of its nineteenth-century predecessor.

9 Oviedo mentions having seen tattooed individuals for the first time in *Oviedo dela natural hystoria de las Indias*, published nine years prior to the publication of the *Historia general* in 1526. He describes a cacique from the province of Catarapa, on the Caribbean mainland, that had "mucha parte dela persona pintada, y estas pinturas son negras y perpetuas: según las que los moros en Berveria por gentileza traen en especial las moras en los rostros y gargantas y otras partes, y allí entre los indios los principales usan estas pinturas en los brazos y en los pechos pero no en la cara sino los esclavos (xviii)." Oviedo would later incorporate this description into the more extended commentary that he offers on the Amerindian tattoo in the *Historia general*; this article focuses on the later publication, given that Oviedo's treatment of this phenomenon is much more comprehensive there.

10 The manuscript of *Batallas y quinquagenas* remained unfinished upon Oviedo's death in 1557 and was not published until 1983.

11 Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general*: "La manera de usar dél es cortando con unas navajuelas de pedernal la cara o brazo que quieren herrar, sotilmente, como entre cuero y carne; y lo cortado polvorizarlo con este humo, así, fresca la cortadura, e por cima embarrarlos con el humo; y en breve es sano, e queda la pintura negra y muy buena y es perpetua la pintura para los días que vive el que así es herrado" (1: 177-78).

12 Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general*: "En esta isla Española y en algunas partes de la Tierra Firme hay pinos naturales como los de España. Y en la gobernación de Nicaragua, entre los indios chondales, en aquellas sierras hay pinares. E una de las granjerías en que se ejercitan es sacar de la tea de los pinos un humo de que hacen unos polvos así como los que sacan los plateros del olio para dibujar; e envuelven este polvo (que es como un carbón muy molido) en unas hojas de biahos, e hacen un bollo tan luengo como un palmo y más, e grueso como la muñeca de un brazo. E segund es la cantidad deste polvo o humo, así tiene el prescio. E llévanlo al tianguez, que es el mercado donde se juntan los indios y indias, en sus plazas para mercadear y sus contractaciones; e allí baratan este polvo por otras cosas o por almendras, que es su moneda común" (1:177).

13 Scholar Julio Caro Baroja, quoting from the theologian Pedro Guerra de Lorca's *Catecheses Mystagogicae pro aduenis ex secta Mahometana…* (Madrid, 1586), describes how Moorish women were encouraged to decorate or tattoo their arms and legs to make themselves more attractive to their husbands (128). These were domestic displays of beauty, not for the public at large.

14 Ramusio and Oviedo became acquainted with each other – if not in person then at the very least via epistle – when the former's son-in-law, Andrea Navagero, returned to Italy from a visit to Spain bearing an Italian translation of Oviedo's *Dela natural hystoria de las Indias* (*Of the Natural History of the Indies*) (Toledo, 1526). Ramusio later published the translation in the *Libro secondo delle Indie Occidentali* (1534).

15 Leo Africanus' *Cosmographia et geographia de Affrica* is dated 1526, and handwritten copies of it circulated among scholars in the following decades (Masonen 131). Cadamosto's and Sintra's accounts of their voyages to West Africa, which took place in the mid-fifteenth century under a veil of secrecy imposed by the Portuguese Crown, were published for the first time the following century, in a collection of narratives of discovery titled the *Paesi novamente retrovati* (published in Venice in 1507) (Parks 3-4).

16 Leo Africanus describes these painted markings as follows: "Their [Arabian] damsels which are vnmarried doe vusually paint their faces, brests, armes, hands, and fingers with a kinde of counterfeit colour: which is accounted a

most decent custome among them. But this fashion was first brought in by those Arabians, which before we called Africans, what time they began first of all to inhabite that region; for before then, they neuer vsed any false or glozing colours. The women of Barbarie vse not this fond kind of painting, but contenting themselues only with their naturall hiew, they regarde not such fained ornmanets: howbeit sometimes they will temper a certaine colour with hens-dung and saffron, wherewithall they paint a little round spot on the bals of their cheeks, about the bredth of a French crowne. Likewise between their eie-browes they make a triangle; and paint vpon their chinnes a patch like vnto an oliue leafe. Some of them also doe paint their eie-browes: and this custome is very highly esteemed of by the Arabian poets and by the gentlemen of that countrie" (159-60).

17 The use of the tattoo as a mark of subjugation does not appear to have been widespread in the Americas. Most Amerindian communities distinguished slaves from "other members of society by their dress, hairstyle, the privileges they had, and their living conditions. An exception was the Indians of Nicaragua who branded their slaves" (Stone 107).

18 The practice of branding, which the Portuguese had institutionalized in the 1440s to register the payment of royal duties, was one whose beginnings had occurred centuries earlier. In *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, a book that Oviedo read, Petrarch (ca. 46-119 CE) recounts that the Samians had once branded their Athenian prisoners on the forehead with the image of an owl, the mark of Athens; the Athenians later retaliated by branding captured Samians with the image of a *samaena*, a kind of ship used on Samos (it is more likely, however, that each side tattooed the other with its own emblem) (Jones 8). The Romans adopted from the Greeks the practice of tattooing as a punitive measure for escaped slaves and criminals. Eventually, Constantine the Great (reign 306-337 CE) abolished the use of facial tattoos, but others on the hands and legs remained legal, and they continued to be used in the Middle Ages (Jones 11-13).

19 Oviedo's circumstances would change once he moved to the Caribbean in 1514. In the *Historia general*, Oviedo refers to "my many natives and black slaves" at his home in Santo Domingo (2: 21).

20 Slaves numbered about 1 in 14 of the inhabitants in Seville in 1565, a mixture of black Africans, Moors, and Moriscos (Pike 345). Prior to the mid-sixteenth century, when Oviedo passed through the city, this number would have been less, but nevertheless Seville was second only to Lisbon as a slave center. Slaves constituted an important source of domestic help and also worked in low-skilled jobs as stevedores, porters, and street vendors as well as in the soap factories and public granaries (Pike 353). There is some scholarly debate as to how many of these slaves would have been branded: William D. Phillips

Jr. maintains that although the brand was used on fugitive slaves, in general it was not employed since it diminished the value of the slave (76). However, scholar Ruth Pike characterizes its use as "common practice" (348). It should be remembered, too, that any slaves that passed through the Portuguese slave trade would have been marked on their arm or chest "to facilitate the collection of royal duties by port officials" (Seijas 165).

21 Legally the *encomienda* – a labor system by which Spanish conquerors and settlers were granted a certain number of indigenous laborers and in exchange took responsibility for the religious education and military protection of their charges – created a distinction between the laborer and the slave, but in practice this was not always the case (van Deusen 7).

22 By the next decade, reports of abuses to these branding practices led the Crown to intervene, both out of moral concern and financial interest: it received twenty percent (the royal fifth) of the value of slaves captured in war (van Deusen 134). In the late 1520s and early 1530s, Charles V issued a flurry of legislation, including decrees restricting the use of the royal brands and their placement on the native body. His efforts to stem the abuses associated with slavery in the Americas would eventually culminate in the New Laws of 1542, which made enslavement of native peoples illegal even in cases of just war or rebellion (van Deusen 107).

23 Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general*: "Y esta tal pintura úsanla de dos maneras: la una es como marca en cierta forma, e con esta tal, hierran al paco, que quiere decir esclavo; la otra es por gentileza, que significa gala o libertad. E cada una de éstas se ponen en lugares deputados en la persona; porque en la cara, do la boca abajo, aunque alcance a las orejas, y en los brazos e pecho, es gala de hombres e mujeres libres, o do la boca arriba, en la cara, es cautiverio" (3:324).

24 Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general*: "la cual pintura o devisa escoge el señor cuando hereda la casa e estado, e la hace diferente de la que usó su padre, para que se conozca cuáles sirvieron al uno e cuáles al otro" (3:324). Oviedo describes these tattoos as being so identical to one another as to appear to have been made by a stamp or mold: "E aquella señal, que traen los libres vasallos o criados e aceptas personas al señor, son do una manera, tan justamente, sin tener uno más que otro, que no paresce sino que, por estampa, está hecho de molde" (3:324).

25 The combination of image and word in a personal device was considered "perfect" because it united the two parts of a whole, or what were metaphorically considered to be the "body and soul" of a device (Martínez Llorente 174).

26 According to the scholar Jesús Carrillo Castillo, for Oviedo, "una devisa…debía ser exclusivamente personal y original, 'gentil' y demostrar el ingenio y la

erudición de su portador. La función principal de la combinación de imagen o 'yvención', por un lado, y de 'letra' o 'mote', de que consistía normalmente la divisa, era el comunicar un 'mysterio' o 'significación' que indicaba la intención o ideal con que se identificaba su poseedor. … Si la 'ynvención' había de poseer valor estético – ser 'linda' – , las 'sentencias' habían de dejar clara la pertenencia a la élite y la distinción personal de quien la ostentaba" (143-44).

27 Oviedo comments on a similar use of the tattoo among the Cuevan military caste. In addition to celebrating feats on the battlefield, Oviedo mentions that some believe these tattoos endowed strength and health to their bearer: "some want to say that this painting isn't just as regalia but rather because they feel healthier painting themselves with such things" (*Historia general* 3: 324).

28 Fernández de Oviedo, *Historia general*: "se pintan comenzando desde la punta de los dedos hasta las muñecas, y desde allí hasta el cobdo, y desde el cobdo al hombro, y después, desde la cinta al estómago, y desde el estómago a las tetas, y desde allí a la garganta, y desde la garganta a la boca, y desde la boca hasta los ojos, y desde los ojos hasta la frente. Y como desde allí arriba no hay más que pintar, el otro grado superior es traer un pedazo de piel de tigre en la frente alrededor. Y llegado a este término de nobleza, el otro grado que es mayor que el pellejo del tigre y de todos los dichos, es traer un collar de huesos de hombres muertos; y el que ya tiene aquesto, está en la cumbre militar … Y el indio que anda ya pintado en la misma cara, o más alto en la frente, o trae el pellejo de tigre, o los huesos que es dicho, es como un valiente capitán, o como un Viriato, o como un otro conde Fernán González, o el Cid Ruy Díaz" (3: 60).

29 Fernández de Oviedo, *Batallas y quinquagenas*: [Alcaide:] "Y no hay mayor título que la costumbre: así a de venir la cosa a tal término, que como andan muchos escudos falsos, y que de muchos sabemos sus vanos principios, y que están entallados en novas armas sin merecerlas ni ser suyas, alegarán adelante el tiempo largo que ha que las tienen usurpadas y gozan de su posesión; y no habrá quien se acuerde de su defectuoso origen, y quedarse han por nobles, mezclando su ruin casta con los mejores." [Sereno:] "Pero ¿qué os parece a vos que sería el remedio de lo que decís?" … [Alcaide:] "lo primero, que no se pudiesen contraer matrimonios que no siguiesen la hidalguía e nobleza; y lo segundo, visitarse los estados y armas, y enmendar muchas falsedades que andan y hay esculpidas y pintadas, y limitar las modernas y no darles armas ajenas que las traen otros antiguos y notorios hijosdalgo. Iten, que cuando el rey o el príncipe hacen merced de algunas armas nuevamente concedidas, que a lo menos, debajo de las firmas de los de su Real Consejo, fuese el privilegio señalado y firmado primero de dos reyes de armas, doctos en esta materia de blasones, y de uno de sus coronistas y naturales de sus reynos, para que les quedasen sendos traslados o registros de tal privilegio, y que sin esas tres

firmas, los del Consejo no librasen ni despachasen la merced; porque haciéndose así los privilegios, irían contentos y no defectuosos ni disconforme a las reglas que según buen estilo y medidas, colores y mentales de armas, se deben guardar y advertir; y escusaríanse muchos fraudes, y los linajes serían menor conocidos" (2: 41).

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