



At the table with Dr. Garcia de Orta

Palmira Fontes da Costa

(UNL, Portugal)

What separates a scientific text published in the middle of the sixteenth century from one published in the last two centuries? In which way have processes of authorship changed and what do they indicate about new practices and modes of validating scientific knowledge? What kind of styles and formats have been privileged in writing about science? What kind of freedom was lost in writing scientific texts in recent times? Is it inevitable?

This talk address these questions by focusing as the main comparison the influential book *Colóquios dos simples e drogas da Índia* [*Colloquies on the simples and drugs of India*] by the Portuguese physician Garcia de Orta who lived for almost 30 years in the territory. The work was first printed in Goa in 1563 and was very innovative in the sense that it presented for the first time the medical virtues of Asian plants, fruits, spices as well as other products the author found in India or knew through his various informants.

The *Colloquies* were written in a dialogic format. They consist of a series of conversations between the various characters to which the work gives voice, including Orta himself and Ruano, a young physician in search of new knowledge from the East. The book considers various subjects and it is not restricted to medical or botanical matters. Various stories are also inserted in the work so that it can be more entertaining and more interesting for a more general public. Food and their qualities, as well as the arts of preparing them with special emphasis to their medical properties occupy a central role in Orta's Book. There are various scenes when conversation is presented at the table, where the appetite for medical and botanical knowledge is combined with the appetite of the body for the same exotic fruits and dishes being discussed. The art of teaching is presented as a vivid and empirical lesson. Equally important is the art of receiving guest often emphasised by Orta. It is therefore not surprising that the *Colloquies* central stage is Orta's own house.