

ANDREAS VESALIUS - FOUNDER OF SCIENTIFIC ANATOMY

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Andreas Vesalius (31 December 1514–15 October 1564) was a Brabantian (in modern-day Belgium) anatomist, physician, and author of one of the most influential books on human anatomy, *De humani corporis fabrica* (On the Fabric of the Human Body). Vesalius is often referred to as the founder of modern human anatomy. He was professor at the University of Padua and later became Imperial physician at the court of Emperor Charles V.

The day of his graduation he was immediately offered the chair of Surgery and Anatomy (*explicator chirurgiae*) at Padua. Vesalius carried out dissection as the primary teaching tool, handling the actual work himself and urging students to perform dissection themselves. Hands-on direct observation was considered the only reliable resource, a huge break with medieval practice.

He created detailed illustrations of anatomy for students in the form of six large woodcut anatomical posters. When he found that some of these were being widely copied, he published them all in 1538 under the title *Tabulae anatomicae sex*.

In 1539 he also published his *Venesection* letter, on bloodletting. This was a popular treatment for almost any illness, but there was some debate about where to take the blood from. Vesalius' pamphlet generally supported Galen's view, but with qualifications that rejected the infallibility of Galen.

In 1543, Vesalius conducted a public dissection of the body of Jakob Karrer von Gebweiler, a notorious felon from the city of Basel, Switzerland. He assembled the bones and finally donated the skeleton to the University of Basel. This preparation ("The Basel Skeleton") is Vesalius' only well-preserved skeletal preparation today, and is also the world's oldest surviving anatomical preparation. It is still displayed at the Anatomical Museum of the University of Basel.

Soon after publication, Vesalius was invited as Imperial physician to the court of Emperor Charles V. He informed the Venetian Senate that he was leaving his post in Padua, which prompted Duke Cosimo I de' Medici to invite him to move to the expanding university in Pisa, which he turned down. Vesalius took up a position in the court, where he had to deal with the other physicians mocking him as being a barber.

Over the next eleven years Vesalius traveled with the court, treating injuries from battle or tournaments, performing postmortems, administering medications, and writing private letters addressing specific medical questions. During these years he also wrote the *Epistle on the China root*, a short text on the properties of a medical plant whose efficacy he doubted, as well as defense of his anatomical findings. This elicited a new round of attacks on his work that called for him to be punished by the emperor. In 1551, Charles V commissioned an inquiry in Salamanca to investigate the religious implications of his methods. Vesalius' work was cleared by the board, but the attacks continued. Four years later one of his main detractors and one-time professors Jacobus Sylvius, published an article that claimed that the human body itself had changed since Galen had studied it.

After the abdication of Emperor Charles V he continued at court in great favor with his son Philip II, who rewarded him with a pension for life by making him a count palatine. In 1555 he published a revised edition of *De humani corporis fabrica*.

Then, in 1564, Vesalius left Spain for Jerusalem for reasons that never became quite clear. Unproven speculation held that he conducted an autopsy on a person who – as he found out during the dissection – was unexpectedly still alive. Further, it was rumored that he was accused of heresy by the Spanish Inquisition and had to flee; or perhaps the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was just a polite way of him leaving the Spanish court. He left Spain with his wife and daughter at the beginning of 1564. While they returned to Brussels, Vesalius continued on to Venice and then further to the Holy Land. Soon after he had set sail, he was reportedly offered a chair in anatomy as successor to Fallopio at Padua. However, Vesalius never returned home from his travels to the Middle East. On the return trip, the ship was hit by a storm and driven ashore on the island of Zante (Zakynthos), Greece, where Vesalius fell ill and died in 1564 at the age of fifty. No one knows where the remains of this great anatomist and author are buried.

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