A Historical Vignette (16)
“Be proud of yourself: you have a History!”

Following in the footsteps of Vesalius around Brussels

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Abstract. Following in the footsteps of Vesalius around Brussels. Every physician is indebted to Vesalius! Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) lived in Brussels for about thirty years in all. First from birth until the age of sixteen years (1514-1530), and later as an adult (1544-1559). These two periods of time in Brussels can be described by walking around some areas of the city.

Vesalius left Brussels definitively in August 1559. He also left behind a fiery and envied reputation as a great anatomist. He could have taken the Willebroek canal to Antwerp, his point of departure for Spain. At the Rivage Gate, in Brussels, where the canal begins, there was a small bridge which was the one and only trace of the city’s second wall. (Magritte, “Les rêveries d’un promeneur solitaire”, oil on canvas, 1926).
According to Vesalius himself, (Fabrica, De involucris foetum in utero, Caput XVII), “Sometimes, when a child is born, the foetus appears covered with the internal membrane around his head, his legs or his arms. In such cases, mothers ever preserve cautiously and superstitiously the internal membrane (amnios) and the external membrane (the placenta proper) for the love of their children, as I saw my dear mother doing (uti charissimam meam matrem fecisse video). The internal membrane is scraped off the external one; then these membranes are carefully washed, stuffed with straw and dried, as is done with bladders”. In the absence of more precise information from Vesalius himself, it would be unreasonable to accept the assertion by some authors that he was born with a caul and that his mother did the same with his own “membranes”. However, it is fair to assume that this was the case with his younger brother François or his sister Anne.

**The Horoscope**

Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576), a friend of Vesalius, was a physician and an astrologer. This is not an unusual combination. Philip the Good, for example, surrounded himself with physician-astrologers because of the speculative belief in relations between the macrocosm (the stars) and the microcosm (man). The great-grandfather of Andreas Vesalius, Jan of Wesalia, was a physician and a Professor and Rector of the young University of Leuven. He compiled several almanacs – annual astrological predictions – for Philip the Good. For the practice of medicine, astrology was a sine qua non: “Quiconques est medechin et se ne set nient d’astronomie, nus hom malades ne se doit mettre en sa main” (No ill man should place himself in the hands of a physician who does not know astrology) [Ria Jansen-Sieben, “La médecine sous Philippe le Bon. La médecine et Philippe le Bon’”]. So Cardano required the precise date of birth of Vesalius to establish his horoscope. As a result, we know the day and the hour of his birth. The horoscope predicted a wonderful career for Vesalius, but it was only published in 1543-1547, by which time Vesalius was thirty years old and had finished his famous *Fabrica*...
**Historical Vignette**

∞ His father’s house. *Helle sraetken* (Figure 3)

The *Helle sraetken*, “Hell’s Alley” was a footpath rather than a regular street. It linked a poverty stricken area, a refuge for the destitute and prostitutes known as the *Banendal* or *Bovendael* (in the area of the modern-day *rue des Minimes*), to the *Wollendries* or *Domain of the Wool*, which owed its name to the fact that wool was laid there to dry. It is the modern-day Wool Street (*rue aux Laines*) (Figure 3). *Helle sraetken* was only concerned by the aristocratic section of Wool Street, near the Sablon cemetery (the present-day *Small Sablon square*). The slope of Hell’s Alley, which is no longer in existence today, can be discerned on either side of what is now the *rue de la Régence*: the *rue Joseph Dupont* moving upwards and the *rue Van Moer* in a downward direction, ending in the *rue des Minimes*, more precisely in a portion of it known at the time as *Blaustraete* (Figure 3), mistakenly translated as *Leaves Street*. In fact, the name comes from Master Jan Blaers, an important person who lived there. That area was therefore a curious mixture of lifestyles where, in a relatively limited area, paupers and aristocrats rubbed shoulders, with the latter group including Vesalius’ father, the apothecary of Margaret of Austria and later of Charles the Fifth.

∞ The Baptism. Sablon Church (Figure 3). Our Lady of the Chapel Church.

Where was Vesalius baptised? The question remains open. Two churches are possible candidates.

First the Sablon Church was located not far from the house of Vesalius’ parents and his family regularly attended this church. Vesalius’ mother left in her will one *sou* a week to five pauper children on condition that they attended mass weekly in the Sablon Church and prayed at the altar of St Wivine. Moreover the parents’ house was located in an area that was registered by the public authority as a portion of the *rue Haute* area, in the Sablon section which took its name from the Sablon Church. The church was attended by aristocrats in particular. Margaret of Austria, Charles the Fifth’s aunt regularly prayed there. Mary of Hungary, Charles the Fifth’s sister and the future regent of the Low Countries, was baptised there.

On the other hand, at the time, the Sablon Church was not recognised as a parish church and so baptisms were not usually celebrated there. The priest of the present Sablon parish has shown us that his church only has baptismal registers dating from after the French Revolution, when it was recognised as a parish church. (There was a first, rather short, period during the Wars of Religion, but it left no registers).

The second church is the *Notre Dame de la Chapelle* (Our Lady of the Chapel). It was built with the aim of evangelising the humble working population around *rue Haute*. The church was built from the 12th century onwards, just outside the first wall of the city. At the time, it was the second parish church of Brussels, with the Church of St Michael, “*intra muros*”, being the first. Our Lady of the Chapel has baptismal fonts dating from the 15th century. Vesalius was baptised in 1515. Unfortunately, the Archives of the Kingdom do not include any baptismal records for that church from before 1562...

Given the aristocratic nature of Vesalius’ family, I tend to favour the Sablon Church. The absence of baptismal registers before 1800 for this church is certainly an argument against. However, in the early 16th century, the members of the clergy were not required to keep such records. This became an obligation only after the 1537 session of the Council of Trent with the aim of regaining control over the sacraments under the counter-reformation.

∞ The education of the young Vesalius. *Helle sraetken* (Figure 3). *St Géry Square; Galgenberg [Poelaert Square]* (Figures 4,5)

Vesalius was educated at three levels: in the bosom of the family (Figure 3), among the “Brethren of the Common Life” and on the Galgenberg (Figures 4,5).

Vesalius’ father was often away from home: as “a manservant” of the emperor and apothecary, he accompanied Charles the Fifth on his numerous travels (his son was to do the same as a physician). So it was his mother who took care of him. Vesalius tells us that she kept at home the medical writings familiar to his ancestor physicians or written by them, such as those of Peter, his great-great-grandfather.

Andreas Vesalius developed his sense of observation at a very early age: when learning to swim with bladders inflated with air, he noticed the elasticity of that organ. He tells us this in a passage of the *Fabrica*, 1543 edition, p 518 (*Liber V, Caput XI: De vesica urinae receptaculo*, paragraph *vesicae substantia*). Apparently, he
also dissected small animals such as cats, dogs, rats, mice and moles.

For nine years, from the ages of 6 to 15, Andreas attended a reputed school in Brussels. At the time, in the historical centre of the city, on the St Géry Island situated between two arms of the Senne River, there was a school named “Nazareth House”. It was run by a religious order, “The Brethren of the Common Life”. They came from Holland, where Erasmus was their pupil for a time. They were also active in Germany, counting Luther among their pupils and they focused strongly on teaching. They set up the first printing house in Brussels and they specialised in the translation of manuscripts from Antiquity. They reformed education by separating classes according to age and by promoting the Humanities, with all the implications of such a step: the teaching of classical Greek and Latin and the spread of notions from Antiquity with the aim of promoting the development of human nature. Erasmus made a statement that reflected one basic element of their philosophy: “Men are not born, they make themselves” (*Hominis non nascuntur sed figuntur*). The pupils of the school came from the leading families of Brussels, and Vesalius was probably their pupil, even though definitive proof for this is lacking. In their school, he would have followed the *Trivium*, or the science of literature (grammar, rhetoric, logic or science of reasoning), probably to a greater extent than the *Quadrivium*, or science of numbers (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music). Today, the location of “Nazareth House”, which was built in 1460, is still visible. After 1622 it was in use as an inn, “the Golden Lion”, which served for a time as a post house. Some years ago, it just escaped falling victim to the voracious appetite of the developers. In an annex of the inn, there is still a small reconstituted section of the Senne River.

And, finally, there was the Galgenberg, the “Hill of the Gallows”. This was education in the field! According to tradition, the young Vesalius had a view over this sinister-looking hill from his home. The bodies of the condemned whose burial was forbidden by judicial judgement were abandoned to the intemperies of the weather and to the delicate attentions of the birds of prey. This natural anatomy lesson drew probably the attention of the young Vesalius to the bodies of the tortured victims, and fascinated rather than repelled him. Whether or not by coincidence, the location today is the site of the pharaonic Palace of Justice (Poelaert Square) (Figures 4, 5).

Figure 4. The Galgenberg in the foreground, in 1695, during the bombing of Brussels ordered by Louis XIV.

Figure 5. Anatomical plate 7 from Book 2 of the *Fabrica*, showing the muscles.
Vesalius’ return to Brussels and his Marriage. The City Hall (Figure 6) and the St Nicholas Church

In 1544, after numerous stays at foreign universities, where he first enrolled as a student before moving straight into professorial positions, Vesalius reappeared in Brussels, crowned with scientific glory. The first edition of the *Fabrica* had been published in 1543. The work was dedicated to Charles the Fifth, who received the only coloured copy from Vesalius personally. It did not take long before Charles appointed Vesalius as his *medicus familiaris ordinarius*.

At the end of 1544, Vesalius married a young girl from Vilvorde he had known since the age of fourteen: Anne van Hamme. Her father was an adviser to the Brussels Revenue Court. The marriage took place in the Brussels City Hall. However, the only tangible commemoration of Vesalius’ memory there dates from 1902! A statue depicting the anatomist can be found on the right-hand facade of the City Hall (from the point of view of the observer), looking onto *rue de la Tête d'Or* (“Golden Head Street”). The facade portrays 16 famous natives of Brussels, with the exception of the mayors of the city, the noblemen and the sovereigns of the Lower Countries, for whom recesses were reserved on the front. Vesalius is the only physician included among the Belgian men of letters and painters. His name is on the plinth of the statue. In accordance with the wishes of the archivists of the city, Armand Wauters and his successor Van Malderghem, the sculptors commissioned were required to be Belgian. They included Egide Rombaux, who was a former student of the Academy of Brussels, and he was responsible for the statue of Vesalius (Figure 6).

As for the church, which adjoins the Great Market, it was originally a chapel dedicated by the merchants to their patron saint Nicholas (the area of St Géry was not very far away). The axis of the choir of the church was clearly oblique in relation to the nave. The choir was most probably the place where the young couple swore their vows. But, as if the “scoliotic” appearance of the place put a curse on Vesalius, his marriage was unsound: he was too busy and she was too coquettish...

Vesalius’ house (Figures 3,7)
The Minimes Church. The Robert Catteau Athenaeum

In 1545, not far from his father’s house, Vesalius had a large residence built looking onto the *Blaerstraet* (a part of what is now *rue des Minimes*). As it was being built and, in particular, as he...
watched the doors of his house being assembled. Vesalius came up with the idea of comparing the joint known as the “ginglymus” (the elbow among others) with the shape and the interlocking of the door hinges (Figure 7). The “Vesalius huys” had a large garden enclosed by walls, an orchard, and outbuildings which included stables. The residence was bequeathed by Vesalius to his daughter Anne. It then passed into the hands of her husband Jean de Mol who, after the death of his wife, ended his life in the Capuchin Order and sold his house to the city of Brussels. The latter donated it to the Count of Mansfeld for services rendered, at which time an inventory of fixtures was made which now allows us to acquire an impression of the importance of the property. The house was finally bequeathed to the Minime Friars of the Order of St Francis of Paola.

An engraving of 1639 gives us an idea of the house (Figure 3). It was replaced by a first church, and then by a later church that we can see today in rue des Minimes. The outbuildings of the house extended beyond the present church, to the site of what is now a secondary school, the Robert Catteau Athenaeum. The present-day facade of the secondary school looking onto rue des Minimes rightly bears a plaque commemorating the memory of Vesalius’ house: Dignum memoria. In hac area seculo XVI surgesbat domus percelebris auctoris Andreae Vesalii Bruxellensis 1515 (date contested) - 1564 qui anno 1542 (date contested) suum celeberri num librum de humili corporis fabrica feliciter posteris typis mandavit.

Vesalius appears to have had a private practice in addition to his work for Charles the Fifth and Philip the Second. He was probably familiar with St Peter’s Leper House, in rue Haute, the forerunner of what is now St Peter’s Hospital (which is still, even today, an official referral centre for infectious diseases!). It is possible that Vesalius frequented St John’s Hospital in the centre of the city. It is probably no coincidence that it was first decided, after 1830, to erect a statue to Vesalius opposite this hospital (even though place des Barricades was finally chosen for reasons of visibility).

The power centre of the city was the Palace of the Dukes of Burgundy on the Coudenberg (Figure 8): “the cold hill”. The latter owes its name to the fact that it was battered by the winds in its high position, with the cooling of the atmosphere as a result. In the Palace, Vesalius was a member of the medical entourage of Charles the Fifth but he was not his leading physician. That position was reserved for two older physicians: a Neapolitan, Narcisso Vertuno, and a Flemish physician, Cornelius van Baersdorp. Very often, however, Vesalius had to treat the Emperor, whose gluttony was proverbial and who suffered from gout.

The abdication of Charles the Fifth on 25 October 1555 in the aula magna of the Coudenberg Palace is one of the key events in the history of Belgium (Figure 9). Vesalius, as a physician of the Emperor, was probably present. A portion of the paving of the aula magna is conserved below the present-day Royal Square and it is not unreasonable to think that on that day, like the Knights of the Golden Fleece, the delegates of the Lower Countries and the Ambassadors, the famous Vesalius himself walked on that equally celebrated paving (Figure 10).

After his abdication, the Emperor decided to dispense with Vesalius’ services but he compensated him with the title of Count Palatine which, albeit a purely honorary title, was given to very few inhabitants of the Lower Countries. Vesalius also received a pension for life. Finally, Philip the Second re-appointed him immediately and this allowed Vesalius to stay on in Brussels in his service for another four years from 1555 to 1559.

The departure of Vesalius; The Willebroek Canal (Figures 11,12)

Brussels has always had a river known as de Zenne, or la Senne. The city actually saw the light of day on a small island formed by its tributaries. The river flowed from the South, from the region of Halle; it crossed the city and left it in the North in the direction of Laeken. The Senne then flowed into the Dyle. After intermingling with the Nethe River, the Dyle acquired a new name, becoming the Rupel for only 12 kilometres, before flowing finally into the Scheldt to reach Antwerp.

However, the Senne was too capricious. The water level in the river sometimes rose to such an extent that floods resulted. At other times, it would dry up. Gradually, it silted up and so it was decided to dredge it and to
straighten it, but these measures were unsuccessful. So even under Philip the Good, it was decided to dig a canal in parallel with the Senne that would join the Rupel at Willebroek. The plan was frequently suspended, mainly because of the opposition of Vilvorde and Mechelen, which refused to be deprived of their income from the tolls for the Senne. The plan was finally implemented under Charles the Fifth a century later.

The digging of the canal began in 1550 and the work was inaugurated in 1561. Supplied by the waters of the Senne and of the Rupel, the canal, which was the first in Europe, entered Brussels through an opening created in the second wall of the city, at the level of the “Rivage Gate”. At this point of the wall, a very small bridge survived until the 19th century. For some hundreds of metres, along the banks of the canal outside the city, a promenade was built that was very popular with the people of the city: the Green Avenue (Allée Verte). Its popularity persisted until the building of the Louise Avenue.

Figure 8. Palace of the Dukes of Burgundy looking onto place des Baille, the predecessor of what is now place Royale. Engraving of 1649: Curia Brabantiae in celebri et popolosa urbe Brusselis by J. Van de Velde. “Baille” meant fence because the square was encircled with a surrounding wall (vertical rectangles). This enclosure inspired the series of stone pillars supporting the small statues of professionals around the present-day square du Sablon. Aula magna (simple arrow), Chapel (double arrow), Warande, hunting ground: present Park of Brussels (triple arrow). Place des Baille (square). St James on Coudenberg Church (cross).

Figure 9. Abdication of Charles the Fifth in the aula magna built by Philip the Good. Vesalius was probably present.

Figure 10. Paving of the aula magna under what is now Place Royale; cf. the shape of the paving in figure 9.
Inside the walls of Brussels, the canal was connected with a series of interior basins, including St Catherine’s Basin, which some have claimed was built in 1565 only. However, others believe it is of earlier construction.

Given that Vesalius’ left for Spain with Philip the Second on about 22 August 1559 (the date was chosen on the basis of Nostradamus’ predictions!), it is unclear whether the canal was used for the journey from Brussels to Antwerp. However, this is likely because, at that time, work had been in progress on the canal for nine/ten years and the entrance of the canal into the city is shown on a map of Brussels by Jacob van Deventer dating from 1555. Moreover, at the time, the state of the roads was generally poor. On the other hand, it was by road (the road to Mechelen) that Charles the Fifth arrived in Antwerp to present his son Philip in 1549 and Philip the Second himself chose the same road in 1556, as the young sovereign... However, the condition of this road is unclear and it is also uncertain whether it would have been able to accommodate the baggage train and the suite of Philip when they left the Low Countries for Spain.

Vesalius and the young Belgium. La Place des Barricades (Figure 13)

By order of the king dating from 7 January 1835 entitled “Tributes paid to the memory of Belgians”, it was decided to erect statues to our national heritage and Vesalius was the second person to be honoured in this way. The first was the French (?) general Belliard, who came to the aid of the Belgians to repel the vengeful Dutch immediately after our independence. Joseph Geefs from Antwerp was the chosen sculptor. Vesalius is wonderfully represented, with the Fabrica in his hand and a necklace bearing a medal that probably refers to his title of Count Palatine (Figure 13). The plinth of the statue was entrusted to an architect from Brussels, Hector Goffart, who used blue stone from Soignies. The square itself was a very recent construction dating from 1824. It was created by a Parisian architect as an elegant haven of peace by the roadside of the second wall of the city, which has now become “the small ring road” with the hectic traffic we are familiar with today. It is the only oval square in Brussels. Its name evokes the numerous barricades erected against the Dutch in 1830.

As an emblematic symbol of our country, the statue of Vesalius was at the centre of an amusing episode of the First World War which shows the humour and the patriotism of the people of Brussels. On 4 October 1916, the German military command in Brussels received an anonymous letter claiming that a certain
Andreas Vesalius, who lived on Place des Barricades, indulged in illegal practices. The author of the letter, a journalist, took up his position on the square and waited. A heavily-armed Prussian detachment surrounded the square and went through all the houses with a fine toothcomb. Even when an inhabitant pointed out that the suspect was standing in the centre of the square, she was not believed...

In another humorous episode, which reflects Vesalius’ fiery reputation, the dramatist Michel de Ghelderode wrote to a friend in 1934: “From 1 July onwards, I will be having a change of scenery... I will be alighting at 24 rue de la Sablonnière (a street ending at Place des Barricades) within the walls of Brussels... one of my neighbours will be Dr Vesalius, who is not dangerous because he is a statue... A splendid area, old man!”

Finally, only a stone’s throw away from the square, near the Congress Column, the walker will discover with some feelings of nostalgia an insignificant stump of a street bearing the name of VESALIUS STREET, Brussels scholar, creator of anatomy, 1514-1564. The street was much longer at first but it was amputated to make way for the building of the Administrative City or “Vesalius Tower”. It is a reminder of sorts...

References