

An early reader of Vesalius' Fabrica

V. Nutton

Summary

Hieronymus Gemusaeus (1505-1544), Professor of Medicine at Basle, is the earliest known reader of Vesalius' "Fabrica", commenting on it in a preface dated 1 August, 1543.

Résumé

Hieronymus Gemusaeus (1505-1544), professeur de médecine à l'Université de Bâle, dans une préface datée du 1er août 1543, nous donne les premières réponses d'un lecteur du "De Fabrica" de Vésale.

Antonio Fumanelli of Verona can hardly be called well-known even by the most ardent of specialists in renaissance medicine.

Biographers and bibliographers say nothing of his life beyond the publication dates of his books, beginning in 1536, but his contemporaries evidently had a higher opinion of him, for a publisher risked bringing out a reprint of all his writings in 1557 (1).

The volume includes his "*Omnium februm et dignoscendarum et curandarum absolutissima methodus*", which was first published in Basle by Johannes Oporinus in 1534, and which opens with a preface by Hieronymus Gemusaeus, dated 1 August, 1543.

Gemusaeus (1505-1544), professor of medicine at the University of Basle from the late 1530s onwards, was extremely active in the world of publishing, seeing through the press,

**Vivian Nutton,
Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine,
183 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE, Great Britain**

especially that of Oporinus, a variety of authors, both old and new (2). The son-in-law of the humanist editor Cratander, he must have been a familiar figure around the printing shops of his adopted city.

Writing in March 1543 in his preface to an edition of Paul of Aegina, published by Oporinus, Gemusaeus announced to the world the imminent publication, from the same printer, of Vesalius' *De human! corporis fabrica*, a work at the importance of which Gemusaeus could only hint (3).

Five busy months later, in the preface to Fumanelli, he could declare his opinion of the *Fabrica*, whose colophon bears the date 1 June and which was probably published a few days later.

"We have recently discovered that Andreas Vesalius, the leading figure in the discipline of anatomy, in that work of great endeavour just published, On the fabric of the human body, has dealt with many passages in Galen that were completely unknown to

most people. Some of them he has explained, others he has restored" (4).

Gemusaeus then goes on to say that the greatest of respect is due to those, he implies like Vesalius, who are the first to make important discoveries.

His comments are of interest for a variety of reasons. They are the earliest evidence of anyone reading the *Fabrica*, and confirm that it must have been published soon after the date of the colophon.

Secondly, Gemusaeus sees the *Fabrica* as marking a break with what has gone before, even if he interprets it, much in line with Vesalius' own rhetoric, as a correction, interpretation, and proper restoration of the anatomical enterprise begun by Galen.

Thirdly, although a Galenist himself - he had been one of the editors responsible for the 1538 Basle edition of the complete works of Galen in Greek - and writing a preface to a treatise that depended almost entirely on Galenic ideas, and even wording, he welcomes the *Fabrica*, despite its strong criticisms of Galen.

His attitude serves as a warning to those who assume that all the medical humanists, of whom Gemusaeus was certainly one, must have followed the line of Jacobus Sylvius or John Caius in condemning Vesalius' departures from Galenic orthodoxy.

There were others, like Philip Melanchthon, equally committed to Galen and the classics, who shared Gemusaeus' positive evaluation of Vesalius, and whose appreciation helped to ensure the swift success of the new anatomy around Europe. One might argue that personal friendship with Oporinus and, although proof is lacking, with Vesalius, whom he may well have met in the publishing house, led Gemusaeus to approve of Vesalian anatomy.

It is also worth noting that he also saw how much Vesalius depended upon, and could be seen as developing, the ideas and practices of his ancient predecessor.

Notes

1. Biographical details, such as they are, are easiest found in E. Gurlt, A. Wernich, A. Hirsch, eds, *Lexikon der hervorragenden Artze*, Berlin, Vienna, Urban and Schwarzenberg, 1884-1888, II, pp. 645-6. For his collected works, see Antonius Fumanellus, *Opera multa ac varia*, Zurich, A. Gesner, 1557.
2. The best bibliographical sketch is that by A. Burckhardt, *Geschichte der medizinischen Fakultät in Basel*, Basle, F. Reinhardt, 1917, pp. 42-43.
3. This important passage was first noted by M. Roth, *Andreas Vesalius Bruxellensis*, Berlin, Reimer, 1892, p. 128. No one, so far as I know, has cited its sequel.
4. Fumanelli, *Opera multa*, p. 412: *Sic enim Andream Vesalium, anatomicae disciplinae antistitem, locos eius (Galenii) permultos a ceteris antea plane ignoratos, partim explicasse, partim etiam restituisse, ex operosissimo illo De Humani corporis fabrica, a se nunc primum edito volumine, nuper cognovimus.*

Bibliography

Vivian Nutton, M.A., Ph.D., is Professor of the History of Medicine at University College London, and Head of the Academic Unit of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine. He has published extensively on all aspects of the history of medicine in the period from the Greeks to the Renaissance.