

## A FACE IN THE CROWD: VESALIUS' JEWISH FRIEND

*A friend of mine Dr. Jeffrey Levine for many years has been fascinated by minute visual details contained in the 16th century anatomic atlas familiarly known as the Fabrica that was produced by Andreas Vesalius. He once suggested to me that an obscure background figure seen on the book's illustrated title page may have been a Jewish friend of Vesalius and, intrigued by this possibility, I decided to investigate.*



The world literature is voluminous concerning Andreas Vesalius' iconic *De humani corporis fabrica* (On The Structure of the Human Body) which was published in 1543. As James Ball wrote in 1910, "Vesalius overthrew the idol of authority in anatomy and taught us to look at Nature with our own eye." Harvey Cushing, one of the Flemish anatomist's most enthusiastic biographers, observed that no book has ever received such acclaim yet was read by so few." In our own time fewer still have seen more than a reproduction or two of a skeleton or "muscleman" in a history book.

The massive atlas, known as the *Fabrica*, contains 659 folio pages of text, 34 pages of index and 6 pages of preface, but its importance relates to the 273 graphics themselves. Scholarly attention has focused mainly on those aspects relating to the *Fabrica's* seminal role in medical history but the elaborate title page is of particular beauty -- as historian Charles D. O'Malley said of it, "there can be no question that the woodcut ranks among the finest achievements of the art of the engraver in the 16<sup>th</sup> century." Vesalius is shown performing a public dissection upon a female cadaver in an anatomic theater, surrounded by a motley crowd of ninety onlookers. Since in the accompanying text Vesalius didn't identify any of them, historians have had a field day speculating about individual identities, picking over fine details as assiduously as the Flemish anatomist examined muscles and bones.

Vesalius was known to personally plan every detail so there was nothing haphazard about the mob scene displayed on the title page where perhaps hidden in plain sight were background features which reflected conditions in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. If deliberately placed by Vesalius, there were numerous precedents for including coded content in Renaissance art. Indeed Benjamin Blech and Roy Doliner suggested in *The Sistine Secrets* that Michelangelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, painted some three decades earlier (1508-1512), contained subversive symbols of which the artist's patron Pope Julius II wouldn't have approved. The authors noted that "every single element of Renaissance art has an inner significance: the choice of subject and protagonists, the faces selected for different characters in the work...their positions, stances, gestures and juxtapositions...all have hidden meanings."

Appearing in the top row of the dissection scene is a bearded man wearing a cylindrical hat - a single face in the motley crowd jostling to have a look. He is removed from the main action and appears troubled either by what he is witnessing or by what his neighbor is whispering in his ear. Over the centuries, scholars have suggested that he was Lazarus de Frigeis (alt. Lazarro Hebraeo Frigeis, Lazari Ebreo, Lazaro Freschi) a Jewish physician whom Vesalius wrote had taught him the Hebrew words for certain bones. In medieval paintings Jews often were depicted as goats, dogs, monkeys or odious characters but this individual appears among the others as an equal and wears no distinguishing badges to mark him as a Jew. However, the University of Padua where Vesalius was working was a center of Humanism where Jewish students were exempted from wearing distinctive hats or badges; on occasion, privileged Jewish physicians also were granted this concession. Indeed, both in appearance and garb this figure is almost identical with a woodcut engraving of a contemporary Jewish physician Moses Hamon (1496-1554) whose family fled Spain for Constantinople and who in his maturity became personal physician to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.

Perhaps placing Lazarus de Frigeis in the crowd around the dissection table was a way of expressing gratitude for his help with Hebrew and in the accompanying text Vesalius provided additional information. According to Charles O'Malley's translation of Vesalius' Latin:

*Almost all [of the lettering] was taken from the Hebrew translations of Avicenna through the efforts of Lazaro de Frigeis, a distinguished Jewish physician and close friend with whom I have been accustomed to translate Avicenna.*

Historian Daniel Garrison's translation (2013) was almost identical:

*Almost all taken from a Hebrew translation of Avicenna with the aid of a prominent physician and close friend of mine, Lazarus Hebraeus de Frigeis with whom I am accustomed to work on Avicenna.*

It wasn't Vesalius' practice to publicly acknowledge either friends or foes so such generous recognition is noteworthy, especially when referring to a Jew. According to historian Jonathan Elukin, though, it's simplistic to view Jewish life merely in terms of persecution and marginalization for although conditions during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries may have been harsh, many Jews developed social relationships with gentiles and there was a network of Christian, Jewish and Muslim intellectuals which spanned the Mediterranean world. Nevertheless if friendship between Vesalius and Lazarus de Frigeis in relatively tolerant Padua would not have been remarkable, surely it might have been risky during this tempestuous period.

By the 1540s Jews had long since been expelled from Iberia, France and most of Europe. In Italy there'd been an influx of émigrés and there were established ghettos in Venice (1516) and later Florence and Rome. However, far more concern was directed toward Protestant reformers in northern Europe than with downtrodden Jews. To be sure, with the onset of the Renaissance many of Italy's elite were seeking Jewish scholars for personal instruction in Hebrew. Humanists not only returned to Greek but also to Hebrew and by 1514 Hebrew was a required subject at the Vatican university. At best, Vesalius' knowledge of Hebrew was rudimentary so in order to provide Hebrew words for bones he needed help. Although his "close" friend Lazarus (an alternate translation describes him as his "intimate" friend) may have taught him Hebrew equivalents, modern scholars have suggested that the result was "most chaotic and variable. To be sure Hebrew words appeared in only three pages and one marginal note in the massive *Fabrica* suggesting that Hebrew medical terminology was not yet standardized during the Vesalian period.

During the Middle Ages Avicenna's fourteen volume *Canon of Medicine* was a standard medical text at many universities, but by the early 16<sup>th</sup> century some iconoclasts were complaining about the "tyranny" of Avicenna who to them represented the stultified Arabic influence which then "occupied" Italian medical schools. Nevertheless, the young Flemish anatomist's departure from Galenic hegemony angered his conservative elders. Avicenna surely represented an important virtual ally for when there was a conflict

between Galen and Aristotle, especially about anatomy, Avicenna often took the side of the latter, which supported Vesalius' contention that Galen was not infallible.

A Hebrew translation of the *Canon* which appeared in Naples in 1491 seems to have been the text used by Vesalius and Lazarus and soon several more Hebrew translations were published in Venice. One was written by the prominent Jewish physician Jacob Mantino, a contemporary of Vesalius, who reputedly was the most prolific translator of Greek and Arabic medical texts to Hebrew. Mantino's family had been exiled from Spain in 1492 and by the time he arrived in Venice in 1528, as an eminent physician he was exempted from wearing the pointed "Jew hat." Jacob Mantino came to the attention of Pope Paul III who employed him as a court physician and later appointed him professor of medicine at the University of Rome (using the name Giacomo Ebreo). But the life of a court physician could be perilous and Mantino ran afoul of Cardinal Sadolet who denounced him and convinced the Pope to issue a Bull which temporarily suspended the privileges of all Jewish physicians. There can be no doubt that both Vesalius and Lazarus were well aware of the shifting fortunes of Jewish physicians like Jacob Mantino and, as we shall soon see, this might have been influential in events to come.

#### WHO WAS LAZARUS DE FRIGEIS?

Although the authoritative biographer Charles O'Malley stated that our bearded spectator in the *Fabrica's* dissection scene "most likely" was Vesalius' Jewish friend, further identification of him remained "an unsolved puzzle." During the 16<sup>th</sup> century Jews didn't use surnames and Frigeis probably referred to a location, probably in northern Europe - Lazarus from Frigeis. Historian Mordecai Etziony was critical of the Hebrew writing used in the *Fabrica*: "If...we are to suppose that both the Hebrew equivalents and their transliterations were written for Vesalius by his Hebrew friend Lazarus de Frigeis...then we must credit the latter with little knowledge of Hebrew since some of the grammatical mistakes are inexcusable for a connoisseur of the language."

Whatever his aptitude in Hebrew, several modern Italian scholars have suggested that at the very same time that the two friends were studying Avicenna, Lazarus had more

important things on his mind. Indeed he was in the process of becoming a New Christian or *converso* and after his conversion, probably in 1550, changed his name to Giovanni Battista de' Freschi Olivi. What follows next is derived from several Italian sources which, in turn, were based on published records of the Venetian Inquisition which was heating up during the 1540s.

There being no evidence that Lazarus de Frigeis was either a “distinguished” or “prominent” physician, it is difficult to understand why Vesalius referred to his friend in this way. Indeed it would seem that the sobriquet might more aptly be applied to his own physician father Raphael de Phrigiis (a.k.a. Raffaele Fritschke) who not only was a scholar but also an influential rabbi in Padua and an authority on Jewish law. When Raphael died in 1540, his will requested a traditional Ashkenazic Jewish burial and left a considerable fortune to his three sons Lazarus, Benjamin and Isaac. However, his extensive collection of books on humanities, logic, medicine, philosophy and Hebrew were bequeathed to Lazarus alone. Apparently he was the most studious son and it's possible that the Hebrew translation of Avicenna's *Canon* that the friends were reading came from Raphael's library.

After Lazarus completed his medical studies in Padua in August 1540, he was granted permission to take the examination which would qualify him to practice medicine in Padua, including care of Christian patients. Vesalius had obtained his medical diploma in 1539 and immediately the Flemish prodigy was appointed chief of surgery – an impressive fast track. Since Lazarus didn't graduate until the next year he was a novice so that the relationship between these “close friends” must have been more like that of teacher and student, albeit they probably were about the same age.

In 1547, five years after the manuscript of the *Fabrica* was finished, Lazarus moved to Venice where he joined the Ashkenazic community and petitioned the chief rabbi for permission to live in the “old” ghetto. (In fact this was a misnomer because the “old” *ghetto vecchio* was an expansion in 1541 of the original *ghetto nuovo* of 1516 in order to accommodate an influx of Levantine (Turkish) Jews.) It's unclear why Lazarus wished

to live in this area which was described as being “old, ruined and in a bad state” but by 1550, shortly after the time of his conversion, as Giovanni he was living outside the ghetto and by the next year he was granted additional privileges that were afforded Christian physicians.

In his new identity Giovanni became a virulent Jew-hater and participated in a Venetian commission which one Sabbath day (October 21, 1553) burned more than a thousand copies of the Talmud and other holy books in the Piazza San Marco. His singular contribution was to advise the commission on what blasphemous books in addition to the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds should be heaped on the fire. The former Lazarus de Frigeis boasted, “I have persecuted, and continue to persecute, those blasphemies and insults that are contained in the books of the Jews, and will go on so doing as long as I live, and after death if that is possible, taking no account of danger, enmity, retaliation or injuries to my body.”

Whether Lazaro/Giovanni’s appalling behavior was sincere or a way of covering his tracks is pure speculation but the *converso* didn’t get off easily. He’d convinced his elderly mother Elena to be baptized along with the rest of the family (when his wife refused he divorced her) but although she agreed Elena had grave misgivings. She became deranged and an accuser claimed that at Sunday Mass “she made ugly faces, said bad words” and yelled at the priest, “You’re lying through your teeth.” In 1555 the matter was formally investigated by The Holy Office of Venice which concluded that the old woman’s ravings were due to madness rather than the words of a deliberate blasphemer. During his mother’s trial, testimony given by a woman named Maddalena identified Giovanni as the former Jewish physician Lazarus, but now he had some standing with the Holy Office since he’d collaborated in the destruction of the Talmud. Giovanni argued that his mother was possessed by evil spirits and either was a lunatic or melancholic; surely this was the work of the Devil singling out the mother of a fearless prosecutor of Jewish blasphemy. Perhaps because of his stellar record, when no public institution would take her in, Elena was committed to perpetual confinement in her son’s house. When Lazarus died, sometime between 1555 and 1560, presumably

he was not buried alongside his father because the Jewish community considered him to be a turncoat – a hostile enemy of his people.

#### PADUA: 1537--1542

Even before Lazarus' conversion, a social bond between these two Paduan physicians would have been perfectly natural since the university was notable for its tolerance of Jewish students and faculty members. Despite its proximity to the Vatican, Padua was part of the free Venetian state and was located some twenty-five miles south of the port city. Humanists believed that a person's worth should be judged by their breadth of knowledge and culture, by accomplishments and not by fortune or religion, and the University of Padua sought out the best teachers regardless of their personal beliefs. It relaxed the requirement that graduates avow their belief in Christianity as a prerequisite to obtaining a degree. The first Jewish medical student graduated in 1409 and was followed by hundreds more from all over Europe – eighty between 1517 and 1619. Indeed there were several Jewish faculty members besides Lazarus during this period, including the esteemed Elijah Delmedigo.

The years that Vesalius spent in Padua corresponded with his first public questioning of Galen's accuracy and it was there that he worked on the *Tabulae Anatomicae* (1538), the *Fabrica* (1543) and the abridged manual called the *Epitome* that was published the same month. When the woodcuts of the *Fabrica* were finished, probably in Venice in August 1542 after about three years of work, Vesalius took almost a year off to accompany his precious treasures to Basel where for some seven months he supervised the atlas's completion by the accomplished printer Johannes Oporinus.

#### 1543: A MOMENTOUS YEAR

Another epic work of science which appeared in 1543 was Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium celestium*. (Legend has it that Copernicus first saw his great work completed on the very last day of his life when he died of a stroke.) That same year Charles V united with England's Henry VIII and attacked France, but more pertinent to Vesalius' future were three other events which occurred at about this time. One was that



Charles V appointed his sixteen year old son Philip as the regent of Spain, who a dozen years later when his father abdicated would assume most of his father's mantles.

(Charles had some 79 titles and once complained that they were "more than one head can carry.") Philip was more religiously orthodox and stiff-necked than his father and under his leadership Spain would become the center of the Counter-Reformation. At about this same time the zealous Cardinal Gian Pietro Caraffa initiated the Inquisition in Rome modeled on the Spanish precedent. Six years earlier his baleful influence had been felt in Venice when Caraffa served as a papal agent and now he vowed "to suppress and uproot, permitting no trace [of heresy] to remain... even if my own father were a heretic, I would gather the wood to burn him."

Books were prohibited from being published without approval of his Holy Office and liberalizing doctrines established by the Council of Trent were suspended. Considering all this, it's conceivable that Lazarus de Frigeis' post conversion cooperation with the Inquisition may have been prompted by prevailing suspicion of the faithfulness of *conversos*, burning Jewish books serving as evidence of his sincerity. 1543 also was the year that Martin Luther published his virulently anti-Semitic treatise *The Jews and Their Lies* so that at the same time that Vesalius published his epic work and joined the imperial court as personal physician of Charles V, Europe was in the midst of political and religious turmoil. Surely his choice of what to say or not say in the next edition of the *Fabrica* must be understood within this context.

## THE VENETIAN INQUISITION

Just what was the political and religious context in the Republic of Venice which governed Padua during Vesalius' most productive years? As described by Brian Pullan, Venice served as a transit town for people on a spiritual journey between two faiths and on a physical voyage between the monolithically Catholic states of western Europe and the religious pluralism of the Ottoman lands.

*Unambiguously Catholic but famed for its “liberty”, it sheltered believer and unbeliever, atheist and zealot, the hesitant and the convinced.... It was often in Venice that Europeans of Jewish blood made their final choice between Christianity and Judaism; those who hesitated and faced both ways, neither conforming fully nor vowing themselves permanently to either creed, were most likely to suffer at the Inquisition’s hands.”*

By 1540 an Inquisition was functioning in Venice consisting of a papal nuncio, the patriarch and a Franciscan inquisitor. In 1542 Pope Paul III revived the Inquisition in Rome and by 1547 things began to heat up in Venice. That was four years after Vesalius left to join the imperial court, but a climate of distrust had been building for years. Although professing Jews and people of Jewish descent were seldom a preoccupation of the Inquisitors, they were an alien community and individual cases heard by the Tribunals involved any form of heresy, apostasy or blasphemy – such as the trial of Elena de’ Freschi Olivi.

When Cardinal Caraffa was elected Pope Paul IV in 1555, religious fanaticism and persecution heightened. Now Jews, who had been expelled from southern Italy (The Kingdom of Naples) during the 1530s and had found safe haven in Ancona, were given their choice of two options: baptism or burning – sixty three chose the former, twenty four the latter while others fled for their lives: According to historian Sheila Hale:

*Under Paul IV the creativity and search for the truth that we think of as hallmarks of the Italian Renaissance were temporarily replaced by suppression, blind orthodoxy and fear of innovation; but only for as long as he lived. Paul’s death four years after his election was greeted in Rome with jubilation. Mobs rampaged through the streets toppling statues of the late unlamented pope and smashing open the cells in which prisoners of the inquisition had been incarcerated. He was succeeded by the moderate conventionally religious Pius IV, an affable man and able bureaucrat, who immediately pardoned those who had participated in the riots and went on to revive the Council of Trent.*

There was constant tension between the Roman and Venetian Inquisitions, the latter being less doctrinaire and intended mainly to reconcile religious duty with political independence and economic interest. Its more practical spirit was closer to that of the court of Charles V, the most powerful ruler in Europe, with whom Vesalius's career now would be linked.

## THE SECOND EDITION

When Vesalius returned to Padua from Basel after publishing his *magnum opus*, he found that the mood had changed. Rivals had emerged at the university and most hurtful of all was his former Parisian mentor Jacobus Sylvius who publicly called him a "madman...whose pestilential breath poisons Europe." Vesalius resigned his teaching position and accepted an offer to become physician to Charles V. To be sure, it may have been his intention all along for he'd dedicated his *Fabrica* "To the Divine Charles V, The mightiest and most unvanquished Emperor" and perhaps these obsequious words helped gain him a place in the Imperial court. Of course it didn't hurt that his father had served as the Emperor's personal apothecary. (The *Epitome* published the same month as the *Fabrica* was dedicated to Prince Phillip of Spain.) In this stricter environment it would have been prudent for the wary Vesalius to temper any overt signs of admiration for a Jewish doctor in the next edition of his *Fabrica*.

It is unclear why Vesalius felt the need to produce an updated version of the *Fabrica*. Naturally he wished to make corrections and improvements but apparently there also was some disagreement about timing with his printer Oporinus favoring waiting until more of the first edition was sold. When the second edition appeared in 1555 its title page had been done over, the craftsmanship quite different and clearly the hand of an inferior artist. O'Malley suggested that the original wood block may have been damaged since it was used not only for the *Fabrica* but also for the *Epitome* which was printed at virtually the same time. Whatever the reason the revised title page contained several intriguing modifications.

In the second edition Vesalius' head and garments appear markedly different, expressions on many of the gawking faces have changed and, perhaps as a concession to the Inquisitors, now the genitals of the corpse are obscured and a nude figure has been clothed. Also there are ominous hints of double meanings – the magisterial staff originally clutched by the skeleton has transformed into a scythe and now the border around the dedication shield is wrapped in ropes and chains. Does the sudden appearance of a ram in the foreground refer symbolically to a familiar medieval iconographic reference to Satan? Or to a scapegoat? It appears as if these newly added images are indicators of deadlier times.

Of course production of such a massive undertaking as the *Fabrica* had to be a joint effort involving anatomist, artist, woodcarver and printer. It was customary for the draughtsman to place the design on wood blocks; then highly skilled craftsmen would cut away the wood to leave the drawn lines projecting in relief. Vesalius was a perfectionist and, no doubt, supervised every phase of the production. The current consensus is that the engraved frontispiece of the first *Fabrica* as well as the portrait of Vesalius probably were done by his countryman Jan Stefan van Kalkar (Calcar) who had joined Titian's Venetian studio in 1536 and had done three drawings for Vesalius's earlier *Tabulae Anatomicae*. However there have been many dissenters.

Professor O'Malley doubted that Kalkar was the primary artist and suggested that Titian himself at least may have consulted on design because of the superb artistry of the first *Fabrica*. Vesalius complained of the enormous financial expense incurred to induce skilled artists to undertake the unpleasant, odoriferous work and the need for him to direct "the eye, hand and the intelligence" of the artist(s). He also remarked on their "obstinacy" and sarcastically considered himself more unfortunate than the criminal whose body he'd been dissecting. All of this suggests that there were more than one artist, but regardless of who illustrated the first edition, even less is known about who did the title page for the second edition. Markedly inferior in technique, it is evident that it was done by the hand of a far less talented artist -- and certainly *not* by Kalcar who had died in the interim in 1547 at age 48.

In the 1555 version of the *Fabrica* the figure of Lazarus remains in place, albeit looking rather wild-eyed and, for an unknown reason, now his previously raised left hand is hidden from view. Perhaps these were deliberate changes or, more likely, reflected the technique of a different artist. But most important for our purpose is that now in the accompanying text when describing Lazarus de Frigeis, Vesalius dropped the phrase “distinguished Jewish physician” referring to him only as his close friend. (Noted by O’Malley and confirmed by Garrison.) Daring to criticize the immortal Galen was bold enough and perhaps to include anything which might be interpreted as Judaizing could be catastrophic. O’Malley suggested that “improvements” in the 1555 text were intended to get rid of many redundancies, including omission of comments on his personal life and that of his friends. Perhaps so, but as Nutton observed, in the second edition Vesalius removed references to “purposes of the Creator...[which] may hint at the growing religious intolerance at the Imperial court that made problematic any theological utterances unless ecclesiastically sanctioned.”

In a letter written to a friend in 1546, Vesalius described how after joining the imperial court, he reacted to criticism by burning his own books:

*When I left Italy to apply myself to the court [of Charles V]...I burned everything, with the intention of restraining myself somewhat in writing. However, I have often regretted the upsurge and have felt sorry for not listening to the advice of my friends, who were present. Although, as far as the notes are concerned, I am very much pleased, because even if they would still be in my possession I would not feel tempted to publish them, as I can easily foresee that they would make each and every one my enemy...I have since repented more than once of my impatience, and regretted that I did not take the advice of the friends who were then with me.*

Stephen Joffe suggests that this impetuous gesture was “the defining turning point of Vesalius’s life.” Just when he’d achieved the pinnacle of professional achievement he

threw it away, settling for a position in the imperial service which reduced him to being a military surgeon, destroying his identity as a scholar and losing his intellectual freedom.

*Unable to cope with the reality of receiving exactly what he had to leave behind not only his academic life but also his own awaiting potential, Vesalius was overcome with madness and grief, causing him to throw his precious notes, labored drawings and treasured books into the fire. Understanding fully that his life [no] longer was his own, but someone else's. Vesalius surrendered that part of himself that he most identified with, and effectively killed it. By burning his work, Vesalius destroyed his identity as a scholar and an anatomist and assuming the role of tragic hero, was forced to reconcile with the impossible reality that he had turned away from his own destiny.*

From this rash act it is clear that young Vesalius had a keen sense of what was politically correct and it would not be surprising if he might “restrain” himself when describing his Jewish friend in the second edition. Nutton remarked that deletions may be as significant about an author as his additions, “It is not always easy to see why some passages have been left out, when others of a similar nature have been left in.” Certainly in the overheated climate of the period discretion was the better part of valor; yet, as O'Malley noted, “the fact that Lazarus was mentioned at all in the later edition is fairly good-evidence, according to the practice of Vesalius, that he [Lazarus] was still alive and the two men were on amiable terms.”

Of itself, that would seem remarkable since the shift in religious attitudes toward stricter orthodoxy made the outlook dire for anyone who publicly said, wrote or did anything which might be construed as heretical. But there was a perfectly reasonable alternative explanation for the deletion, for by the time that the second edition was written Lazarus, now Giovanni, no longer was Jewish! He'd converted sometime in 1549, six years after the first edition of the *Fabrica* appeared and at about the same time that Vesalius was beginning to work on a second edition. But by now Vesalius was off with the imperial court in northern Europe and may not even have known what had happened to his

friend. When Philip II and his court moved to Madrid, Vesalius moved with them, never again to return for long to Italy nor to his homeland – and now things became much worse. As described by James Ball,

*The hand of the Church was heavy on the land; the dagger of the Inquisition was stabbing at all mental life, and its torch was a sterilizing flame sweeping all intellectual activity. The pursuit of knowledge had become a crime and to search with the scalpel was accounted sacrilege.*

There was no opportunity to perform a dissection nor even obtain a skull and jealous Spanish court physicians were hostile. It was rumored that Vesalius had mistakenly started dissecting a still living patient. Historians have refuted this story and whatever the true reason, the by now fifty year old court physician felt the need to leave Spain. As is well known, except for the details, in 1564 Vesalius sailed to the Holy Land on what was described as a “pilgrimage” – some suggested that it was penance. On the stormy return trip his ship may have been damaged and he was cast ashore on the Greek isle of Zante where he died, some historians suggest as a result of scurvy, and was buried in an unmarked grave.

#### WHAT KIND OF MAN WAS VESALIUS?

Historians have employed numerous adjectives to describe the anatomist's temperament: choleric, impetuous, disputatious, cocksure, extroverted, sarcastic, wrathful, schizoid, taciturn, melancholy, avaricious, having an artistic temperament. A provocative (but unsigned) essay *Vesalius the Man* argued that “except for the glorious *Fabrica* and *Epitome* nothing by Vesalius would be any loss to science.”

*There is the problem. Why was the unique genius of the man fertile only for three or four years? How came it that the greatest exponent of science of his century abandoned his career for a place at court? What sort of character can we descry through the fog of eulogy and legend and sheer hero worship? He was clearly not a man of many friends....He had some repellent*

*traits; in his later years he was secretive and eccentric and may even have been semi-insane. He was certainly vain and boastful, and as a writer had most of the faults of the humanists and few of their virtues. His worst feature, perhaps, came out in his ambition for he abandoned, as have many a great scientific career, for the measly reflected glamour of a life at court.*

His former mentor Sylvius had called Vesalius “a ridiculous madman” for daring to criticize the immortal Galen. Historian Stephen Joffe also referred to him as a madman suffering an identity crisis who rashly burned his works in a self-destructive act. So we have the parallel ironies of Vesalius burning his own books when he joined the Imperial court and Lazarus burning Jewish holy books when he converted to the Christian faith.

#### WAS THERE A JEWISH CONNECTION?

Andreas Vesalius’ Christian identity was secure. Nevertheless, during Inquisition times suspicions were rife of any taint of Jewish blood. According to his own writing, Vesalius’ Flemish roots, mostly from Wesel in Cleves, dated back at least to the early 15<sup>th</sup> century; three generations of his ancestors were court physicians and his father was chief apothecary for Charles V. Such *bona fides* didn’t guarantee that lurking somewhere in a family’s history there might have been a Jewish connection but in the case of Andreas Vesalius there is absolutely no such evidence, his sympathetic reference to his friend Lazarus notwithstanding.

Nevertheless, two of Vesalius’ medical contemporaries had post-mortem surprises. In 1553 Michael Servetus (a.k.a. Villeneuve), who had been a fellow student of Vesalius in Paris, was burned at the stake in Geneva for his public stance against Calvinism and later, for good measure, was burned again in effigy by the Catholic Inquisition. More than four centuries later modern scholarship proved that Servetus was descended on his mother’s side from a prominent Jewish family of Aragon. Similarly, the corpse of the famous Portuguese *converso* Garcia d’Orta (1501-1568) was exhumed twelve years after his natural death in Goa when a relative confessed under torture to continued



Judaizing and implicated his cousin. An *auto da fe* was performed and d'Orta's ashes thrown into the sea.

Such narratives could have come straight out of *Candide* but unlike Voltaire's naïve Dr. Pangloss, the pragmatic Andreas Vesalius was well aware of the perilous world in which he lived and avoided mixing anatomy with theology. As for his friend Lazarus, by the time that the second edition of the *Fabrica* was written, he had opted out of his religion and, as Giovanni, would be obliged by the Inquisition to provide home care for his demented mother who hadn't. Indeed, with all this in mind, it would seem that what "distinguished" Vesalius' friend was not his medical career nor his language skill as much as his virulent public denunciation of his own Jewish roots.