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978-1-107-02635-3 - Vesalius: The China Root Epistle: A New
Translation and Critical Edition
Andreas Vesalius and Daniel H. Garrison
Excerpt
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 *Text*

*(Page breaks of the 1546 edition are indicated by an oversize asterisk.
The corresponding page number of the 1546 edition appears in the margin.)*

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ANDREAS VESALIUS OF BRUSSELS
Imperial Physician

EPISTLE

Explaining the Method and Technique
of Administering Boiled China Root
Which the Invincible Charles V
Recently Employed

And Summarizing
Among Other Things
The Substance of an Epistle to Jacobus Sylvius
That is of Great Usefulness
To Students of the Truth,
Especially of the Human Fabric;
Since it Shows How Easily Galen
Has Heretofore Been
Excessively Trusted on That Subject.

*There is Also Attached to This Epistle
An Index of Important Subjects and Words*



Basel
From the Press of Joannes Oporinus
In the Year of Human Salvation
1546
In the Month of October

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To the Illustrious and Great
 Duke of Tuscany

COSIMO DE' MEDICI

Patron of Studies

Greetings from
FRANCISCUS VESALIUS¹

Since Jacob Scepper,² a young man who in my judgement is outstandingly well versed in medicine and the disciplines that relate to it, came here for his studies and I often met with him concerning the affairs of our native country, I began to question him closely about what doctors were doing in Belgium, and whether anything had been published by them to assist and enhance our common studies, of which we had not yet been informed. He brought forth among other things an epistle of my brother Andreas, who is extremely devoted to your Illustrious

¹ Vesalius' younger brother Franciscus was the third child of Andries and Isabel Van Wesele. He studied Medicine at the University of Ferrara, from where this letter is dated.

² Probably a son of Charles V's diplomat Cornelius Duplicius De Schepper (1501–1555).

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Dedicatory Preface

4 Majesty and a great admirer of your virtues for which you are so praised to all the world, and he is a keen herald thereof among the learned and all his friends. Scepper confirmed that he had written out this epistle from the original, and entrusted it to me with many names so that he could say it was circulating among the Belgians variously written out in the hands of certain people and be thought no less worthy to them than to himself, so that it would be set in type and become common to all. Since it appeared likewise to many people * to whom it was shown, I did not hesitate to ask Scepperus to make me a copy of my brother's work to send immediately to Ioannes Oporinus,³ the painstaking and highly educated printer, formerly a professor of Greek literature, lest it be badly printed through the negligence and greed of some inferior printer. I know well how great the good feeling of Oporinus is towards my brother and with what workmanship my brother's writings come from his press. The books of *De humani corporis fabrica* and the *Epitome* based upon them are no small credit to him and to our family, the Vesalii, and I wish the *Epitome* had not been spoiled so disgracefully by a certain Englishman (who I think lived with my brother for a time).⁴ He took what had been written with great care succinctly as a list in the *Epitome* and expanded it with excerpts taken from the books of the *Fabrica* of which it is a summary. He utterly corrupted what had made it most praiseworthy and so roughly and absurdly copied what had been set forth with elegant drawing and engraving that he preserved no appearance of Oporinus'

³ Ioannes Oporinus (Johann Herbst), 1507–1578, son of the painter Hans Herbst, taught Latin at the Basel Latin School and Greek at the University of Basel before opening his own press. He had published Vesalius' *Fabrica* and its *Epitome* in 1543.

⁴ John Caius (1510–1573) records having lived with Vesalius for eight months in Padua. See O'Malley 1964, 101, 105–107. A Galen loyalist, he rejected Vesalius' skepticism of Galen's accuracy in human anatomy. Caius later enlarged the foundation of his former college at Cambridge, which was renamed Gonville and Caius College. Caius is wrongly charged here with plagiarizing Vesalius: the actual plagiarist was Thomas Geminus in *Compendiosa totius anatomiae delineatio* (London, 1545), see O'Malley 1964, 88 f., 223. See also n. 197 below.

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majestic edition. It therefore seems to me no injustice if the author grieves that his name was not removed from that utterly incompetent English edition, to keep anyone from believing that such badly made and botched illustrations in the whole series of nerves and vessels had ever been produced by him. It is strange that that imitator, when plotting against the efforts of others with the itch for writing from which he suffered, did not read the epistle placed at the beginning of *De humani corporis fabrica* in which my brother wrote that he would willingly share the illustrations prepared at his expense with a diligent printer rather than have them badly printed and forced into a smaller format * (which can never be large enough in any case).

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As for the publication of the present epistle (which I should have thought should be titled a book had it not been written in the form of an epistle, however lengthy and varied, and which is seen to have grown unexpectedly beneath his hand into the size of a book), because it was not possible to make use of my brother's advice in that I feared it would be published by somebody in an inferior way before I could be sure of his opinion because of the intervals of distance and the crises that are now troubling Germany: I hope he will not disapprove of my effort and diligence, or even be angered because I arranged for publication (since someone would do that as well).

To avoid being deceived in my opinion, I judged that this labor should be performed for all students of medicine under the auspices of your immortal name and enhanced by its splendor. It is very clear to me that your Majesty holds my brother in the same esteem as do to a man all great men and lovers of letters. He hears easily and often from those with whom he now associates daily regarding what is widely circulated concerning the swiftness of your resolve, your unique knowledge of military affairs, your amazing swiftness (which was always certain) in those matters, and the sacred and never sufficiently praised government of your dominions, which should never be equal to your heroic spirit. So it is that among so many great and famous princes of Italy none is as often mentioned now by Germans

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and Belgians as Cosimo, Duke of Tuscany.⁵ This is not only due to the civil and military gifts of your mind, but also because under your patronage letters and all the disciplines, which had been failing because of the neglect of many princes, not to mention the hostility of those who are counselors to them or given to them as advisors, are now seen to be nurtured * and to grow in leaps and bounds. Indeed, we know how the family of doctors (to which you seemed the last remaining hope, had you not brought into the world wise, elegant and supremely esteemed sons, heirs of your virtues) has always concentrated all its energies upon the recruitment from everywhere of the most outstanding followers of the disciplines and their generous support. It did not concern itself in the past whether doctors were on the rise outside Italy and were held by other princes of Italy in the ranks of barbarians.

How much you strive to surpass your ancestors in this type of virtue is proof that the ancient university of Pisa, whose ancient splendor you wish with so much zeal and generosity to restore, lacks no effort on your part in supporting those who you do not doubt are leaders of their disciplines. Therefore it is no surprise that in so few years this university has begun such great advances to the great credit of all studies, and now shines brightest among the great universities of Italy.

Although critics are by no means absent who impress upon everybody the harshness of the weather at Pisa in that most elegant place in the world amid the greatest success in everything they do, nevertheless with your benevolence, though there was almost no need, an excellent provision was made for aqueducts which alone were found lacking, and you left nothing undone that would establish a pleasant home and market for the Muses there. Here too at the urgent advice of Francesco Campana,⁶ a man distinguished for

⁵ Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–1574) was Duke of Florence 1537–1574 but did not become Grand Duke of Tuscany until 1569.

⁶ Private secretary to Duke Cosimo. See O'Malley 1964, 451 n. 54.

many disciplines and virtues, a chief confidant of your Majesty and no less zealous in your praise, Juan Bautista Recasulano⁷ is the bishop of Cortona. For various reasons, and especially because of his incredible humanity and efficiency in conducting business, he is remembered with great fondness in the court of the Emperor, * after he ceased to be the eloquent ambassador of your Majesty there. You will therefore be thought divinely given to the world for the strengthening and recovery of the disciplines. That is what everybody immediately began to foresee after your father Joannes,⁸ easily the most highly praised commander in war of all in our memory (as he gave in no small measure to fate), when you were still very much a child took you from your nurse's arms and had you thrown headlong from a window higher than anyone could easily believe (were it not well known to everyone in Italy), as your genius was hurrying to the aid of your father. That was to determine whether his son, the one he hoped you would be, because you were taken up without any harm in his lap and in his mantle and were not to be torn apart into pieces, would fall to the ground. Warfare would tell the story, but only the greatest kind, as is foreseeable from your disposition.

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Moreover, I believe my brother will be highly pleased to undertake this labor of his, a hazard of judgement, fortified by your authority. The proof of that is that I believe he will not reject the labor when your intellect is perfectly adapted to all tasks. For in addition to the use of new remedies, especially the method of administering the decoction of China root (which I see is given to those who are most devoted to your glory), and other medicines that are not unpleasant to know and are included in this epistle, reasons are added as well by which a devotee of truth can consider that Galen, easily the foremost of professors of

⁷ In addition to his service as Bishop of Cortona, Recasulano was ambassador from the duke of Florence to Charles V, 1543–1545.

⁸ Giovanni de' Medici or Giovanni dalle Bande Nere, 1498–1526, famed for his exploits as a condottiero or mercenary military captain.

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anatomy, did not dissect humans but described other animals differing in many places from humans. Among other things, Galen did not provide true descriptions and uses of the parts; he often assigned functions incorrectly, and made many arguments in anatomy that are not altogether valid. One might well believe that all the things thus set forth by my brother * are supplied as material to those who put their faith only in books, and think that Galen committed no anatomical errors whatever or any other mistakes, who have been stitching together writings for about three years now (unless they had started even before the publication of my brother's book). They refute in order everything he now investigates, one by one, as if they fell under common topics. They are occupied not only in praising Galen but in writing down calumnies or criticisms occasioned by a newly discovered truth.

By your generosity in the advance of learning, concerning which I have more than once heard my brother and many others taking pride, it has quickly been achieved that all these discoveries have been demonstrated to students at your university in Pisa by his dissections of bodies; and you yourself are aware how those who know the most in the presence of bodies, and the doctors and philosophers best prepared to correct Galen, have had to resort to my brother's opinion.

Indeed, some hope should dawn upon scholars that my brother will at some time return to your university and perform dissections of bodies for the profession of medicine. I should like to take refuge there as if to a free field which you provide for arguments about the disciplines – if only at last some will put themselves forward out of many (a number of whom have shamefully abandoned the enterprise), so that they may return without dissent from my brother's dissections just as I saw certain physicians come wholeheartedly into my brother's way of thinking when I once spent several months in Padua and was present when he was teaching anatomy to a very large class. Yet I too now, who was repeatedly put to the study of law by my parents contrary to my preference, which was inclined to medicine and always recoiled from the law, and by