Story Telling

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Storytelling of the Anatomical Theater at the University of Padua

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Introduction

The autopsy Anatomical Theater, built at the University of Padua in 1594 by Hieronymus Fabricius ab Aquapendente (1537-1619), Professor of Anatomy and Surgery, is unanimously considered the first research laboratory in the history of medicine.

In 1222 a new "Gymnasium Omnium Disciplinarum" (School of all the disciplines) (Figure 1) was founded in Padua, following a migration of scholars and lecturers from the University of Bologna, looking for freedom of teaching and learning. The original disciplines were theology and jurisprudence.

The University Aristarium Medicinae Physicae et Naturae (Faculty of Medicine) was founded in 1399. In 1404 the city of Padua fell under the rule of Venice Republic. According to Vesalius, the University of Padua was the most famous gymnasium in the world.

Figure 1: The facade of the Palazzo del Bo. See written *Gymnasium Patavinum*.

Strategic northern geographic position, civil and religious freedom, tolerance, teachers of great fame and value, latin as international language and, last but not least, the interest on Natural Philosophy more than on Metaphysics, all were an appeal. Certainly Padua would not have been Padua without University.

In 1517 the Venice Senate designated three "Reformers" to take over the University government.

The Republic of Venice, with the Doge as President and lion as symbol (Figure 2), was open mind and guaranteed the maximum freedom. The mottos of our University were and still are: «*Universa Universis Patavina Libertas*» (Patavian Universal Freedom open to the Universe) and «*Libertas docendi et investigandi*» (Freedom of Teaching and Research) (Figure 2).

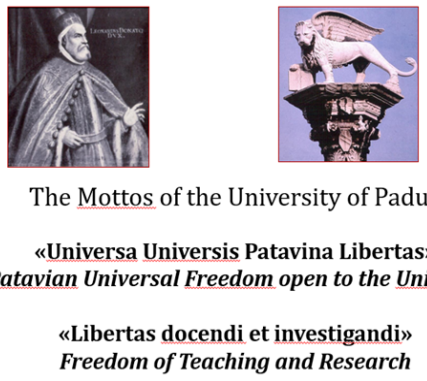

Figure 2: Up left is the Doge Leonardo Donà and up right the winged Lion. Mottos of the University of Padua are: (a) Universa Universis Patavina Libertas; (b) Libertas docendi et investigandi.

At difference from Bologna and Florence, profession of catholic faith was not compulsory to achieve the diploma.

The study of anatomy was the most important aim to cross the Alps for the European students.

The Reformers were used to contact the "podestà" (the mayor of Padua). On December 1, 1556 they wrote the following letter: "*Since Anatomy is very useful to students of Medicine, and the present time is very appropriate, I beg your Magnificence to give some cadavers, sentenced to death, to the most excellent Fallopius who will make dissection with great expectation and satisfaction of those scholars…*" (Figure 3).

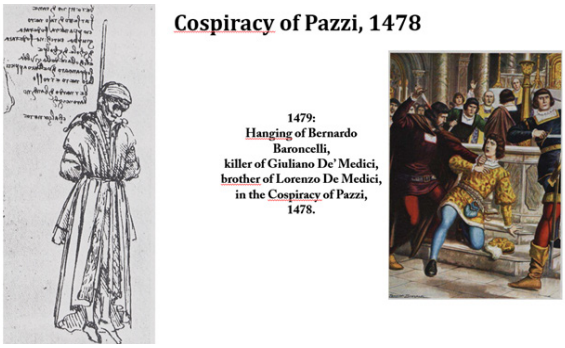

Figure 3: The source of bodies to be dissected was subjects sentenced to death. Here is the case reported by Leonardo da Vinci after the conspiracy of Pazzi in Florence in 1478.

The Anatomical Theater was inaugurated on January 16, 1595 (Figure 4). It was strongly wanted by Fabrici and inspired by the Dominican father Paolo Sarpi (1522-1623). The Theater was designed by the architect Dario Varotari (1539-1596), and supported economically by the Reformers. One of them, Leonardo Donà, strongly wanted Galileo for the chair of Mathematics of the University of Padua in 1594. He later became Doge and Galileo showed him ships at distance with the telescope.

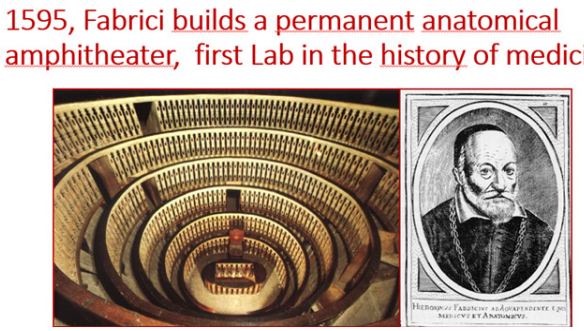

Figure 4: The illustration shows on the left the Anatomical Theater and on the right a portrait of Fabricius ab Aquapendente, the Professor of Anatomy and Surgery, who strongly wanted a permanent theater.

At difference from ancient tradition, when dissection of cadavers was carried out at open air over a mobile structure, the Fabrici anatomical theater was stable, indoor and like an amphitheater.

By entering into the Anatomical Theater you can see the bust of Leonardo Donà and the statement "Mors gaudet succurrere vitae" (Death enjoys to rescue life) (Figures 5, 6).

Figure 5: The Anatomical Theater, Palace of Bo - University of Padua, with the bust of Leonardo Donà, at the time a reformer.

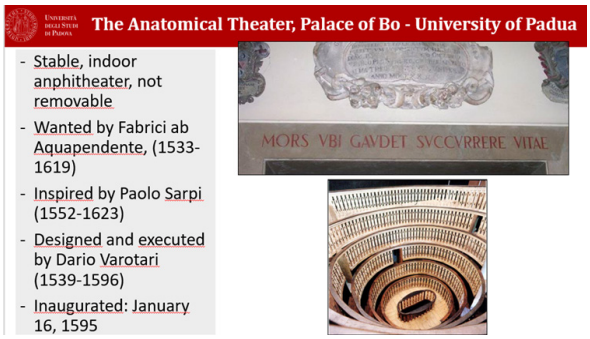

Figure 6: While entering the Anatomical Theater, you see written "Mors ubi gaudet succurrere vitae" (death enjoys to rescue life).

The Anatomy School of the Padua University developed particularly during the so called golden centuries (XV-XVI-XVII) (Figure 7). Andreas Vesalius in 1543 published the first illustrated book of Anatomy (De Humani Corporis Fabrica) [1], the same year when Nicolaus Copernicus, student at the University of Padua, published the De revolutionibus orbium coelestium. Matteo Realdo Colombo succeeded to Vesalius and in 1559 published the De Re Anatomica, reporting the discovery of pulmonary circulation [2]. Gabriele Falloppius succeeded Matteo Realdo Colombo and in 1561 published Observationes Anatomicae, with the discovery of uterine tubes. Fabricius ab Aquapendente published in 1603 De Venarum Ostiolis, including the discovery of venous valves (Figure 8) [3]. When he saw the venous valves for the first time in 1574, immediately felt an emotion, equal to that of Galileo while seeing the moons of Jupiter in 1610 (Figure 9).

Figure 7: The Professors of Anatomical School in the University of Padua

at the time of golden century: Vesalius, who wrote De Humani Corporis Fabrica (1543), Realdo Colombo who wrote De Re Anatomica (1559), Falloppius who wrote Observationes Anatomicae (1561), Fabricius ab Aquapendente who wrote De Venarum Ostiolis (1603), Harvey who published Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus (1628), Morgagni who wrote De Sedibus et Causis Morborum (1761).

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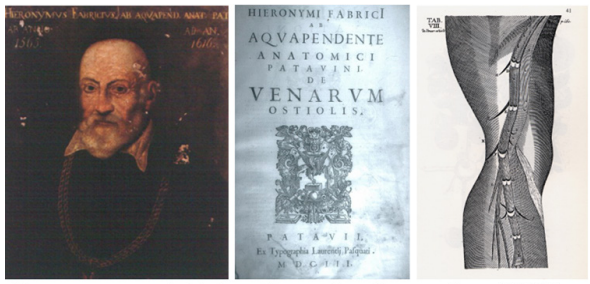

"A me summa cum letitia inter dissecandum observata fuere (1574)"

Fabrici, De Venarum Ostiolis, 1603

Figure 8: The cover of the book *De Venarum Ostiolis* by Hieronymus Fabricius ab Aquapendente, published in 1603.

Stellas... incredibili animi iucunditate... observavi

Galileo Galilei, 1610

Figure 9: When Fabrici saw the venarum valves (ostioles), he felt an emotion similar to that felt by Galileo when he observed the moons of Jupiter by telescope.

Within the Anatomical Theater the dawn of Cardiovascular Medicine came off. Fabricius with normal anatomy and his fellow William Harvey (Figure 10) with animated anatomy. Venous valves (Figure 11) inspired him to the discovery of "general" circulation, published in 1628 in Frankfurt with the title "*Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus*" [4] and Giovanni Battista Morgagni with morbid anatomy in search of causes and explanation of symptoms of fatal diseases [5].

Figure 10: (a) Coats of arm of William Harvey as councillor representing both Anglican and Scottish students, he was student of Medicine at the University of Padua from 1599 to 1602, when he graduated. (b) Portrait of Harvey in the room of 40 most famous students. (c) Harvey portrait and the Anatomical Theater.

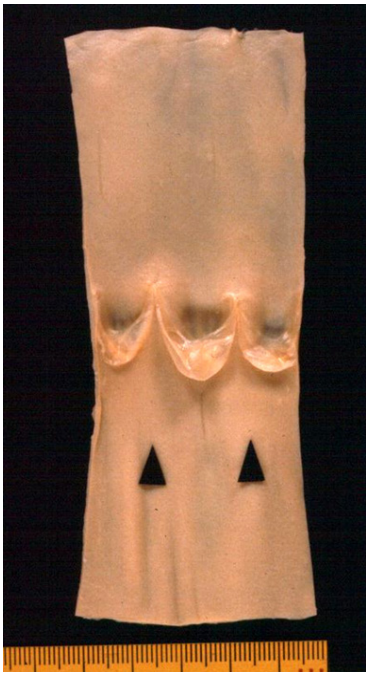

Figure 11: Harvey realized that the veins valves had the function to support the centripetal venous flow, hindering blood reflux.

In this Anatomical Theater Morgagni performed hundreds of autopsies on patients he visited in life. In his first lecture of Theoretical Medicine chair he stated: "It is impossible to pursue the nature and cause of any disease without dissection of cadavers" (Figure 12). This was the starting of clinico-pathologic correlations [5].

A bust of Morgagni was erected by students of the Natio Germanica

in 1768, standing in the Theater. It is still there in this Temple of Medicine (Figure 13).

Figure 12: The young Giovanni Battista Morgagni in 1712 and his inaugural lecture at the Theoretical Chair "*We will state that it is impossible to pursue the nature and cause of any disease without dissection of the cadavers*".

Figure 13: G. B. Morgagni, Professor of Anatomy at the University of Padua (1716-1771) and his bust erected in the Anatomical Theatre by the Students of the Natio Germanica in 1768.

The morbid anatomy autopsies of Morgagni in the Anatomical Theater (Figure 13) were open to lay people. Professor Camillo Semenzato (1922-2000), historian, in his book "*The Anatomy Theater: History and Restoration*", published in 1995 [6], wrote meaningful statements: *«Nor can we forget that the anatomy lessons, organised while all the other lessons were silent, and in the presence of the entire academic body, also had the flavour of a ceremony, and as such were a means of strengthening the bonds between the city and its major institution, the University, towards which Padua looked with a mixture of pride and amazed and perhaps envious admiration» […] «In this place, different from any other, in this secret and almost sacred place, those who entered, whether they were students or teachers, changed in some way. In no other place like this, in no other lessons like the anatomy ones, in no other cerimonies – not even in the most unusual academic rituals – did such awareness and so much pride for the value of science.*

And again: This is why the anatomy lessons were a big event for the city itself: they allowed entry into the temple of knowledge, the University» «When the ancient bell of the Bo, the deepest sounding one in town, announced the beginning of the anatomy lesson, the regular progress of the academic year would pause before the solemn entrance of death ... The anatomy professor then became the actor or rather the priest of a ritual, and conveyed the pride of his knowledge, as also the awareness of his own human limitations» […] «As in a real theater, during the dramatic action, everything was focused on the open body and on the explanations that the professor gave. And the show was truly exceptional, looking inside the man, inside life, everything that otherwise would have remained invisible, unknown. In this place different from all the others, in this secret and almost sacred place, whoever had the right to enter, student or teacher, really became different too. In no other space like this, in no other lesson like those of anatomy, in no other ceremony, not even in the most refined academic rites, could there be so much awareness and so much pride in the values of science» […] *«And this is why anatomy lessons were such an event for the city itself: they allowed one to enter that temple of knowledge that was the University and that so often did not seem so when observing its pomposity and its transgressions. Those who were invited entered the most intimate place of all university life and at the most qualifying moment of the academic year and found themselves face to face with the sacredness of death at the moment in which it was faced, if not exorcised, by the violent right of life. In an unequal but tenacious struggle that has always taken place on the most concrete threshold of all those that separate us and unite us to the Mystery».*

Still nowadays lay people are freely admitted to the Anatomical Theater of the Institute of Pathological Anatomy. This is why Padua is called the town of great doctors.

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