



Initial I of larger series, and initials L, N, O, and D of smaller series from second edition of Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica*. (After Ollerenshaw, 1952.)

# News, Notes and Queries

## NOTE ON A HISTORIATED INITIAL LETTER IN THE *FABRICA* OF VESALIUS

THE historiated initial letters in the first and second editions of the *Fabrica* of Vesalius have been examined in detail by Ollerenshaw.<sup>1</sup> Setting aside those used in the index, which appear to be taken from the printer's ordinary stock, the first edition has four large initials and a nearly complete Roman alphabet of smaller initials, all representing chubby infants engaged in activities related either to anatomy or to surgery. Several of the anatomical vignettes, notably the large Q and T, and the small D, Q, R, and T, directly illustrate Vesalius' procedure in teaching as it is recorded by Balthazar Heselr.<sup>2</sup> In the more sumptuous second edition, the four large initials from the first edition were used again, and a fifth of an entirely different character added. The smaller set were recut in a larger size to suit the larger text type of this edition, but with only minor changes in design; one additional initial of a distinctly different character was added to this set.

Ollerenshaw argues that the initials of the first edition were designed and cut in Basle, where the text was set up, but they are so integral to the text that to me it appears far more likely that they were designed along with the illustrations in Venice, and the blocks may even have been cut there. The altered and additional blocks for the second edition, on the contrary, were doubtless both designed and cut in Basle.

One of the larger and two or possibly three of the smaller initials illustrate human material being secured for dissection. It is the first of these illustrations which poses our problem, so that the others are best considered first. One of them (initial L) depicts a body being taken down from the gallows in the presence of a group of priests. From the gesture of one of the figures, Ollerenshaw infers that the priests are opposing the taking of the body for dissection, but their presence is more probably an essential part of the 'great pomp' with which Heselr records a body being conveyed from the gallows to the scene of dissection. This 'great pomp' may also have inspired initial N, which shows a body carried on a stretcher and escorted by armed attendants, although Ollerenshaw interprets this scene as either the return of a successful body-snatching expedition, or the evacuation of a battle casualty. The woodland setting of this scene is not necessarily an argument for one of these alternatives, since a similar background is implausibly used for several of the anatomical and surgical vignettes, perhaps in keeping with the quasi-mythological character of the actors. Initial O depicts a severed head being handed down from the scaffold by the headsman; such a head is shown being dissected on initial D.

The small initials L and O thus depict anatomical material being obtained by legitimate means; only initial N might possibly refer obliquely to an unofficial supply channel. By contrast, an initial I of the larger series unequivocally depicts a body-snatching exploit. Why an illegal method of procuring anatomical material should be given this prominence is a question which to my knowledge has not been adequately discussed, and indeed hardly seems to have been asked. Even though Vesalius was willing in actuality to profit by such thefts, although they involved also the imputation of sacrilege, openly to advertise the practice appears unnecessarily daring.

A possible explanation of the prominence given to this scene may perhaps be found in the Venetian background to the genesis of the *Fabrica*; Venice cherished the memory of a sanctified body-snatching exploit, by which Venetian emissaries had carried off from Alexandria the supposed body of St. Mark, their city's patron saint. Although the two pictures by Tintoretto in the Scuola di San Marco which commemorate this exploit<sup>3</sup> date only from about 1560, they must have had precursors, and one such, or a draft for one, could have provided the inspiration or indeed the model for the Vesalian initial. Derivation from such a model might account for the seemingly irrelevant figures in the right-hand half of the field. Ollerenshaw remarks that it is uncertain what the child with the flag is doing; in fact, the position of the feet of this figure in relation to those below it leaves no doubt that it is air-borne. If the design was adapted from a serious composition of the finding of the body of St. Mark, this figure may well have originally been that of a heavenly messenger; in Tintoretto's later rendering, St. Mark himself appears to assure the searchers that they have found the right body.

It is also possible that, under the colour of an implied act of homage to the patron saint of Venice, Vesalius was calling attention to the shifts to which the anatomist had to resort, and perhaps obliquely pleading for greater liberality in the official supply of bodies. Another of the large initials, O, depicts the preparation of a skull by boiling, a procedure which had been believed to come under ecclesiastical ban.<sup>4</sup> The prominence given to these two subjects might have been intended as a challenge. However, since the still widely used *Anathomia* of Mondino asserted the unlawfulness of boiling bones, Vesalius might in this instance be challenging not ecclesiastical authority but rather the perpetuation of the medieval anatomical tradition incarnated in Mondino. The other two large initials have straightforward didactic subjects, illustrating teaching procedures which Vesalius expounded in his text and which Heseler records his using in practice.

The suggestion that the design of initial I has its basis in Venetian hagiography may further support the contention advanced earlier in this note that the design of these historiated initials originated in Venice rather than in Basle. This suggests the further possibility that, at the time this initial was designed, Vesalius still contemplated publishing his work in Venice, and had not finally decided to entrust it to Oporinus at Basle.

#### REFERENCES

1. OLLERENSHAW, R. The decorated woodcut initials of Vesalius' *Fabrica*. *Med. biol. Ill.*, 1952, 2, 160-6.
2. ERIKSSON, R. *Andreas Vesalius' First Public Anatomy at Bologna, 1540. An eye witness report.* (Lychnos-Bibliotek, No. 18), Uppsala and Stockholm, Alquist and Wiksells, 1959, 343 pp.
3. MATHER, F. J. *Venetian Painters*. London, George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1937, xxviii + 497 pp.
4. SINGER, C. *A Short History of Anatomy and Physiology from the Greeks to Harvey*. New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1957, xii + 209 pp.

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