

*Vesalius: "The China Root Epistle": A New Translation and Critical Edition.*

Andreas Vesalius.

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The *China Root Epistle* disguises a wolf in sheep's clothing. Written while Vesalius was serving as physician to the Holy Roman emperor Charles V, it was to appraise a recently discovered East Indies plant, much in demand for afflictions such as gout and syphilis. Vesalius critically reviews the origin and method of "administering boiled china root," then dismisses its use by physicians as "stupidus" (13–45). In the separate *Preface to an Italian Treatise on the China Root*, also addressed to his physician friend Joachim Roelants, he explains how he learned about it. This takes only thirty-two pages. Vesalius's real concern is revealed in the remainder of the work: to establish and convey "anatomical truth" on the fabric of the human body by correcting Galen and the transpositions from animals in Galenic anatomy.

The *Epistle* was printed three years after *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543) from a secondhand copy that had reached Vesalius's younger brother Franciscus. The present version, based on the Oporinus's editio princeps (1546), is not a literal translation. The editor has chosen to create "a readable text" due to the complexity of the Latin, often "congested," opaque, and requiring "diligent guesswork" (xxv). No examples, however, are shown of the difficulties faced by "a lifelong Latin reader," or his proposed resolutions. He provides a text, rich in historical notes, and admirably readable, but streamlined of areas of ambiguity, leaving no room for alternative interpretation by scholars.

The textual format has also been improved. Bracketed headings have been added to break up the tedium of a continuous text, and listed in the extensive table of contents, with the original paginations indicated. Illustrations, largely lacking in the Latin text, have been inserted, reduced in scale, from the woodcuts in the 1543 and 1555 editions of the *Fabrica*, "to help the reader visualize what Vesalius saw in the body" (xxviii). These support the detailed textual annotations throughout, linking the content of the *Epistle* to the *Fabrica*. In an informative introduction, the translator gives the background to the china root, then discusses the purpose and controversial relation of the *Epistle* to Vesalius's "lost commentary" (xvii–xxvii). A prosography lists "Early Modern Persons Mentioned in the *Epistle*" (239–42), the range of which is of interest. The bibliography is useful, but there are noticeable gaps (e.g., Vivian Nutton). In Vesalius's own index of words and subjects, one would have expected the Latin originals, which are not given with the English translations.

Vesalius's longer second title of the *China Root Epistle* is also deceptive. The larger content is more than a summary of Vesalius's letter to Jacobus Sylvius, his former teacher, on his declaration that "nothing written by Galen is completely in error" (46–52). Vesalius bypasses the plagiarists of his illustrations and "calumniating

adversaries” (233) with brief comments, to give a comprehensive, hands-on description of human anatomy. In the *Fabrica* Vesalius had realized the consequences of “blind faith” in Galen by his initial acceptance of the *rete mirabile* in humans. His discovery of the truth evolved through his accurate graphic representation of observed detail, as well as his comparative approach: simultaneously reading Galen’s text with animal vivisection and human dissection (G. A. Russell, “Vesalius and the Emergence of Veridical Representation in Renaissance Anatomy,” in *Fine Arts, Neurology, and Neuroscience*, ed. S. Finger et al. [2013]: 1–32).

In the *Epistle*, Vesalius declares his independence with uncompromising evidence. The result is not only a devastating, systematic demonstration of Galenic errors and their corrections. With rigorous methods of investigation, Vesalius maps the structure and function of human anatomy from head to toe, encompassing the systems (bones, muscles, veins, arteries, nerves) as well as the parts (i.e., organs) of the body. His personal reflections leave no doubt of a reluctant physician, observing patients, alive or at autopsy, first and foremost as an anatomist, searching for truth.

The *Epistle* was completed in twelve weeks, while Vesalius was looking after the Venetian ambassador who had fallen ill in Nijmegen. Having already burnt his extensive anatomical notes, observations, and commentary on Galen, how was Vesalius able to achieve such a remarkable level of investigation in 1546? Did he reconstruct it all from memory, or was the total loss of the notes an exaggeration? In the introduction, Garrison suggests that the *Epistle* may be regarded as the “core of the lost commentary on Galen,” expanding on the earlier *Fabrica* (xxii). If this is the case, then the *Epistle* becomes a source of fundamental importance for the extent of anatomical evidence Vesalius had gathered during and after his teaching. Non-Latin readers can now compare its content with the annotations in Vesalius’s own hand to the revised *Fabrica* of 1555, viewed as a major contribution to anatomical understanding in its own right rather than a mere update of 1543 (V. Nutton, “Vesalius Revised: His Annotations to the 1555 *Fabrica*,” *Med Hist.* 56.4 [2012]: 415–43). Considering its significance, the *China Root Epistle* is a most important addition to both Vesalian and Galen scholarship, joining the translator’s earlier English versions of both the 1543 and 1555 editions of the *Fabrica* (2013).

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