BLOOD – SYMBOL – LIQUID

EDITED BY

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PEETERS
LEUVEN - PARIS - WALPOLE, MA
2012
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ANATOMY AND BLOOD SACRIFICES IN THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD

THE FRONTISPICE OF *DE HUMANI CORPORIS FABRICA*
BY ANDREAS VESALIUS AND THE SACRIFICIAL SCENE

Luigi Lazzerini

This essay will take issue with blood sacrifices in the Renaissance era. For the sake of the medico-religious argument in this book, in this chapter, three well-known examples of blood sacrifice have been excluded: the practice attributed to the Jews of sacrificing Christian children on the eve of Easter, the presumed sacrifices held during the witches’ sabbath and the slaughtering undertaken by the peoples of the New World, as described by travellers and missionaries of the era. The sacrifices discussed here concern ritualistic, anatomical and even carnival-like performances, executed by those same Europeans who so disdained the presumed sacrificial practices of the above-mentioned peoples or social groups that in their eyes appeared to be ‘barbarian’ and ‘inferior’. Condemned, yet at the same time exalted by Christianity, the practice of sacrifice was for the Europeans of the Renaissance period both an obsession and a question of taboo. In psychoanalytical terms, we may speak of repression. In the iconographical evidence that was used for this article, the presence of bloody sacrificial practices has to be deduced from a series of clues. That is, the actual moment of the sanguinary sacrifice itself is not represented but merely alluded to indirectly through the depiction of the moment in which the animals to be sacrificed are led to the altar.¹

¹ The bibliography on the theme of sacrifice is vast and practically impossible to cover completely. For a first approach, see Grottanelli, *Sacrificio* (Rome/Bari, 1999) (with extensive bibliography) and L. Lazzerini, ‘Sacrifício’, in: R. Cesarani, M. Domenichelli, P. Fasano ed., *Dizionario dei temi letterari* (Turin, 2007), pp. 2121-2126. See also: L. Lazzerini, ‘Il tradimento di Oporino. Anatomia e alchimia’, *Micrologus. Natura, scienze e società medievali*, 7 (1999), pp. 421-435. On blood sacrifices attributed to the Jews, see A. Toaff, *Pasque di sangue* (Bologna, 2006), which provides testimonies of sacrifices of Christian children practised by some Hebrew communities. Toaff’s reconstruction is fascinating when dealing with the imaginary and the psychological representations, but extremely weak when he discusses the question in terms of reality. The theory of sacrifice as ‘rimosso’ has been developed in detailed research which explores the theme through extensive
Vesalius’ frontispiece

The most important treatise on sixteenth-century anatomy, *De humani corporis fabrica* by Andreas Vesalius, published in Basel in 1543 by Johannes Oporinus, reveals its extraordinary quality immediately in the famous frontispiece. In the fascinating scene (Figure 1), which seems confused and at the same time ritualised, Vesalius himself can be seen performing a dissection on the body of a woman in an anatomical theatre, while a crowd of spectators throngs on the surrounding tiers.\(^2\)

According to Vesalius’ biographer Charles O’Malley, who has provided one of the most complete descriptions of the frontispiece, the scene appears to take place in the open air, as is suggested by the stones that can be seen on the top floor of the semi-circular building in the background, as well as by the vegetation that partly covers the arches. The area could reasonably be identified as the courtyard of the University of Padua. The classical building hosts wooden tiers arranged in three levels, which constitute the anatomical theatre itself. Among the mass of people crowded on the tiers, some rather singular figures can be seen. There is a naked man, a spectator who is about to fall on top of another sitting below him, a hooded and bearded figure who looks like a Benedictine monk, and a young man with a *Macaca mulatta*, a small monkey, on his shoulder, which is amusing somebody else sitting above him. There is also a woman, perhaps a prostitute who is looking for scraps of the corpse to use in amorous enchantments, or a midwife keen on anatomical knowledge. A man with glasses and students with textbooks in their hands or even open in front of them are intent on substantiating the correlation between the dissection and what is written in the book. A figure in Hebrew dress might be ‘the distinguished Jewish physician’, Lazarus of Frigeis, a close friend of Vesalius with whom he had translated Avicenna. Young students intermingle with older figures, bearded men whom O’Malley identifies as Paduan officials or simply citizens curious to see the dissections that are taking place in the theatre. High up, in the centre of the scene, the coat of arms of the Vesalius’ family, represented by three weasels, is borne by two cherubs. They rest their little feet on the decoration that frames the title of the work, which is decorated with fantastic animals and the head of a bearded character with a wide-open mouth and his hair tied back with a band, but with several locks flowing free.

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The skeleton, the skull of which is under the head of the latter character, suggests, according to O’Malley, the importance of osteology in anatomical practice. The American scholar notes how for unclear reasons the dimensions are distinctly oversized. The skeleton, holding a stick, seems a more picturesque detail, referring to the anatomist doing the same during public dissections. As mentioned, the corpse of a woman is to be seen on the dissecting table. The depiction of her internal organs is identical to figure 24 of Book V of the Fabrica. It is known that the woman portrayed had been condemned to death and had probably tried to avoid the execution by declaring she was pregnant. The anatomist occupies the centre of the scene. His right index finger is decorated with numerous rings and he is dressed in the same flowered robe that can be seen in the self-portrait of the author next to the first text page of the Fabrica. In contrast to the self-portrait, showing an oversized head and disproportioned body, in the frontispiece the proportions are accurate. The fact that the anatomist proceeds with the demonstration personally without delegating to an attendant is of course fundamental.

Vesalius is surrounded by a group of students and in the midst of them probably stands one of his close friends, Vito Trinonio, with whom Vesalius once had a discussion about the problem of the expelling of menstrual blood. In the circle of students, two older men stand out. O’Malley identifies them as Wolfgang Hertwart, a nobleman from Augsburg, and the Paduan philosopher Marcantonio Genua. The latter is, perhaps not without reason, dressed in old-fashioned garments and wearing close-fitting top boots. The two men below the table are both attendants, whose task in the Middle Ages was to dissect the corpse. In the new anatomical procedure as Vesalius wished it however, their task was much more modest and limited to such tasks as sharpening razors and knives. Another attendant is leading a dog towards the area where the dissection is taking place.3

In 1555, Oporinus and Vesalius published a second, revised edition of De humani corporis fabrica, probably coinciding with the end of the first run. The edition of 1555 opened with a similar woodcut to that which we are discussing here. Between the first and the second edition, however, some changes can be discerned. This second version (Figure 2) is the work of another artist of inferior quality. Some details have been eliminated, others modified. The nude figure has been clothed and rendered proportionally correct, while the figure amusing himself with the monkey is no longer a man but a woman with dishevelled hair. A goat can be seen next to the dog which is being led into the dissecting area, and the character dressed in old-fashioned clothes now sports more modern shoes. Around the cartouche,

3 The woodcut is described in detail by O’Malley, Vesalius, pp. 139-144.
which shows the privileges of the king of France, of the emperor and of the senate of Venice, ropes and chains can be seen. According to O’Malley, these are of the kind used for restraining animals when vivisection was performed, a practice not unknown to anatomical science of that time. The head of the anatomist, moreover, is larger than normal. The greatest difference, however, concerns figure of the skeleton, which is now grasping a scythe rather than a stick.

The anatomist and his printer

When the first edition of *De humani corporis fabrica* appeared, Vesalius was about thirty years old. The anatomist was born in Brussels on December 31, 1514, in a family of already well-known scientists. In 1528, the young Vesalius, following the family tradition, enrolled at the University of Louvain, where he remained until 1531. In 1533, intent on completing his medical studies, he moved to Paris where he was introduced to the Galenic sources, thanks to the teachings of his professors Guinther of Andernach and Jacques du Bois from Amiens, more commonly known by the Latin name of Jacobus Sylvius. Both Sylvius and Andernach were men of letters rather than anatomists, their expertise being mainly of a linguistic nature and neither one was particularly interested in the practice of dissection. Soon Vesalius’ ideas developed in a different direction. He became convinced that an anatomist should know how to handle a corpse and in all likelihood perfected his technique on animal cadavers. From the very first dissections that were entrusted to him, he showed exceptional prowess in practical anatomy. At this time he also started to frequent, along with his fellow students, Montfaucon and its cemetery of the Innocents, where the corpses of the condemned were delivered.

Back in Louvain in 1536, Vesalius defended his thesis, known as *Paraphrases on the ninth book of Rhazes*, which was published in 1537. Having obtained his baccalaureate, he made a short journey to Basel where his thesis was published again by Robert Winter. From Basel he moved to Padua, the university town of the Republic of Venice and one of the most prestig-

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4 A. Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem* (Basel, 1543, 21555). For an analysis of the second edition, including the frontispiece, see O’Malley, *Andreas Vesalius*, pp. 269-282. Figures 93-93 in J.B. de C.M. Saunders and C.D. O’Malley, *The Illustrations from the Works of Andreas Vesalius of Brussels: with Annotations and Translations, a Discussion of the Plates and their Background, Authorship and Influence and a Bibliographical Sketch of Vesalius* (New York, 1973), show the evolution of the composition, starting from some sketches which, at the time of publication of the book by Saunders and O’Malley, were held in the National Museum of Stockholm and by a private American collector, Edward E. Bodman, of Pasadena.
ious of that era, where his value was immediately recognised. There, Vesalius was proclaimed doctor medicinae in December 1537 and immediately afterwards the senate of Venice appointed him Professor of Surgery. He was only twenty-three years old at the time, and while recognising his exceptional talents, it is extremely likely that he also received the highest recommendations. Vesalius was one of the first anatomists prepared to descend from the professor’s chair and dissect the corpse himself. In those days it was an unusual event, and such a state of affairs made his lessons very popular.

Vesalius distributed reproductions of the arteries and nerves among his students to make his explanations even clearer. To assist them even more, in 1538 these reproductions appeared in print under the title of Tabulae sex. Academic circles at the time expressed much scepticism regarding anatomical illustrations, and the more traditional anatomists objected to the tables, judging them to be degrading to the teaching profession and not supported by any ancient tradition. However, the success of the Tabula sex with the students and an even vaster public of curious and learned people was extraordinary. When his academic position in Padua was consolidated, Vesalius published a brief compendium of anatomy for students, which was actually a simple reissue of the work by Guinther of Andernach. Publishing this so-called Venesection letter meant embroiling himself in a deep contemporary controversy by introducing for the first time problems that were derived directly from anatomical observation. In 1541, Vesalius was called upon to collaborate on the new edition of the works of Galen that Giovan Battista Montano and Agostino Gadaldino had been asked to realise for the Giunta Press. The work, seven volumes in folio, was published almost simultaneously in Venice and Basel, the latter at the Froben printing office.

Two years later the work that secured Vesalius’ immortality, De humani corporis fabrica, was printed. The preparation period for the Fabrica must have been long, with O’Malley hypothesising that the author waited at least four years, utilising his empirical observations, having accumulated anatomical sketches that he had done himself in the course of his study and practice of dissection in Paris, Louvain and Padua. The particularity of the Fabrica lays undoubtedly in the constant interaction between the text and the tables that accompany it. Text and images are linked together by means of a system of cross-references, thus guaranteeing the reader full comprehension even without an actual corpse to study and at a time when scientific vocabulary was still insufficient.\(^5\)

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This extraordinary enterprise would not have been possible had Vesalius not joined forces with a printer who was fully capable of pursuing the dream of realising a definitive work of anatomy, Johannes Herbst, better known as Johannes Oporinus. Born in Basel, Oporinus had started out as a manuscript copyist and proofreader for the famous Froben printing office. It is known that later he became a close collaborator and friend of Paracelsus, of whom he wrote a disconcerting portrait. Liberated from the oppressive wardship of the visionary alchemist, Oporinus made a living by teaching Latin and Greek at the university. In 1536, however, he changed profession again, this time turning from professor and humanist into printer. At first he worked in association with others, including Robert Winter, his brother-in-law, who had printed Vesalius’ thesis in 1537. The collaboration with Winter saw little success and did not last long. In 1539, Oporinus started a press of his own, this time with good results, despite the fact that he encountered economic difficulties as a consequence of his excessive generosity. The printing business continued until 1566. Two years after it closed in 1568, Oporinus died and was buried in the cathedral of Basel. The idea of publishing the work of Vesalius constituted for Oporinus a total betrayal of the convictions of his former master Paracelsus, who had mistrusted the practice of anatomy to the point of declaring it wicked, as well as completely useless for investigating the human body and its pathology.\(^6\)

**A symbolic representation**

O’Malley holds that the woodcut, in his opinion one of the masterpieces of sixteenth-century printing art, was directly inspired by the anatomist, who must have given extremely precise instructions to the artist. According to the author, Vesalius ‘was always concerned with facts rather than symbols’. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the frontispiece of his work can be considered as the union of ‘two factual scenes in one’. The woodcut, O’Malley notes, illustrates on the one hand the practice of anatomy in a theatre as it took place in that era, while on the other hand it is a presentation of the ‘new and advanced pedagogical methods’ of the anatomist.\(^7\)

From a merely referential point of view, it should be noted that many of the elements of the dissection as depicted in the woodcut were real. The thronging of the spectators was true to life, as was the presence of women, the crowds of servants in charge of the preparation of the body, as well as the presence of animals. In fact, sixteenth-century treatises on anatomy con-

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\(^7\) O’Malley, *Vesalius*, p. 140.
tain plenty of detail regarding each one of these elements. O’Malley’s refer-
tential analysis of the frontispiece is, however, not completely satisfying. 
Observing this famous woodcut closely, one cannot help but feel a sense of 
discomfort and notice the presence of a strong symbolic component that is 
not easily defined. 8

Passing from a referential point of view to the symbolic aspects, it is 
essential to first step back from the details for a moment, in order to analyse 
the scene as a whole. As we have seen, we are dealing with a representation 
on three levels: the lowest is occupied by servants and animals, the interme-
diate level accommodates the anatomist and spectators, while the highest 
level is reserved for the dominating figure of the skeleton. A fundamental 
change can be seen in this new arrangement: in medieval iconographic 
anatomy, in fact, the table was placed transversally and thus the corpse ap-
peared stretched out lengthwise, while the spectators, if any, were depicted 
standing in a marginal position. In this case, however, the table is arranged 
in the middle of the composition, while the spectators are much more nu-
merous and appear as actual participants in the dissection, looking towards 
the observer. Also, the position of the servants below the table is a new el-
ement. Where does this new arrangement of the anatomical scene come 
from? Is it merely the result of more detailed knowledge of perspective and 
the characteristic taste of the period?

\textit{Pagan sacrifices in the Renaissance period}

In the second issue of the \textit{Journal of the Warburg Institute} (1938-1940), 
Fritz Saxl published an important and well-informed article on a little-
known subject: classical sacrificial reminiscences in the literary and figu-
tative arts of the Italian Renaissance. In this article, Saxl did not mention, or 
at least not overtly, the already more than conspicuous quantity of literature 
which scholars of anthropology had accumulated on this question, starting 
with Robertson-Smith, Frazer, Hubert and Mauss. 9 He took the point of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{8} The frontispiece has been the object of endless interpretations, many of which 
evidence the symbolic elements of the woodcut. Cf. among others G. Ferrara, 
\textsuperscript{9} F. Saxl, ‘Pagan Sacrifice in the Italian Renaissance’, \textit{Journal of the Warburg Institute} 2 (1938-39), pp. 346-367, from which I have taken the quotations that 
follow. In the last few years, the cult of blood in a Christian context has been 
view of an iconologist, whose attention was attracted by the figurative documents as well as the literary. Some clergymen believed that Hebrew and Roman ritual sacrifices had influenced Christian liturgy. This was, for example, the case with St. Isidore. Nevertheless, according to Saxl, there were no representations of pagan sacrifice in the medieval period before the thirteenth century, while scenes of biblical sacrifice are numerous, for example, that of Abraham and Isaac. Among the first representations mentioned by Saxl is a drawing by Matthew Paris which depicts a sacrifice to Diana. The offering is a cup of the blood of an animal whose throat has just been cut. Later, sacrificial iconography shifted its interest to the history of Troy. In the theatrical representations by the French poet Jacques Milet, recalled by Saxl, the scenes of blood sacrifice were frequent. Saxl claims that there was a lot of interest on the part of the public in this type of scene, as can also be concluded from the many religious Mystery plays.

For various reasons, in the late medieval period interest in sacrifices increased enormously. In the first place, a real obsession with the tortured body of Christ and the veneration of the ‘five wounds’ developed. The wound in the ribs took the name of amatorium lavacrum (Laver of Love) or, in the language of St. Catherine of Siena, ‘wine-cask’ or ‘storehouse of blood’. The manuscripts which deal with the subject are written in red ink with obvious symbolic allusions. Christ is represented ‘in the wine-press’ where God the Father himself turns the screw, pressing the blood out of Christ’s body for the salvation of mankind. Saxl comments, ‘this tendency accompanies the re-birth of classical antiquity in the Renaissance, and leads on to the Reformation period. It provides the emotional background for the representation of pagan sacrifice by Italian Renaissance artists, who presented it as counterpart to the Christian ritual’. A characteristic of many artistic Renaissance productions is in fact that they contain a mixture of pagan and Christian sacrificial themes. In a work by the sculptor Galeazzo Mondella, known as Moderno, for example, dating back to 1488, the Madonna is sitting on a throne with other saints by her side. On the throne there is a bas-relief ‘showing a bull being led to the sacrifice’. The practice of decorating the throne of the Virgin with sacrificial scenes was taken up subsequently by other artists, for example, the Bolognese Costa, who represents the Madonna with Giovanni II Bentivoglio. The bull being led to sacrifice is also depicted on the sarcophagus of Christ in a work entitled ‘Christ in the Tomb with the Virgin and St. John’, a plaquette which is the work of a Paduan maestro, dating back to 1500. In this case, as in others which will

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and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond (Philadelphia PA, 2006), while the pagan reminiscences on which Saxl focused have been disregarded.

be analysed further below, the representation of a sanguinary sacrifice does not necessarily imply the shedding of real blood, but rather limits itself to merely alluding to the ritual slaying, showing the moment in which servants escort the victim to the altar. However, in *Blood of the Redeemer* by Giovanni Bellini, blood gushes forth explicitly from Christ’s ribs and is collected in a chalice by a golden-haired angel. The painting is one of the clearest expressions in art of the theme of the ‘highly precious blood’ of Christ, although, regarding this topic, Saxl has also discovered some non-Christian scenes rich in sacrificial allusions, such as that of the mythical Roman hero Mucius Scaevola in front of Porsenna. In the painting by Bellini, a panel to the left-hand side depicts an altar, behind which stands a man with a staff, alongside a satyr with a ferocious look about him, who is playing the pipes. On the other side of the altar there is another man in the act of performing a libation with a *patera*, while in his other hand he is holding a ‘small sacrificial vessel’, in Saxl’s words. Saxl explains that ‘[t]he pagan sacrifice with its sound of pipes, the fire that consumes the victim and the wine that is poured into the fire, must be understood as foreshadowing the Christian rite, whereas the wine in the chalice is the blood of the Redeemer’.  

*Andrea Brioschi, also known as Il Riccio*

According to Saxl, the two conceptions of sacrifice are similar in spite of their apparent irreconcilability. This point of view is further demonstrated by an analysis of two artefacts by the Paduan sculptor, Andrea Brioschi (also known as Il Riccio) – one of the bronze bas-reliefs that decorates the great Paschal candelabrum kept in the Basilica del Santo in Padua and another bas-relief, again in bronze, created for the family vault in the Church of St. Fermo at Verona, of two physicians of the Paduan school, Girolamo and Marcantonio della Torre. Andrea Brioschi, apparently called Il Riccio because of his thick shock of hair, was born in Trento in 1470. His father, a goldsmith from Milan, having travelled far and wide in Italy, settled in Padua in 1507, where Il Riccio subsequently concentrated his activities and established relationships with many intellectuals from humanist circles. Following a period of apprenticeship in the workshop of Bartolomeo Bellano, Andrea became known for his plaques in bronze, realising in the choir screen of the basilica’s presbytery two bronze panels which depict the stories of Judith and of David, who bears the Ark of the Covenant. Later, he worked for the church of S. Maria dei Servi, manufacturing bronze reliefs depicting episodes of the Legend of the True Cross. Right from the early

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years of the sixteenth century, Brioschi began to create small bronze plaquettes with both classical-mythological and religious subjects. In 1507 he was commissioned to create the Paschal candelabrum for the Basilica del Santo, a splendid work nearly four metres high, which was finished and finally put in place at the beginning of 1516. Work on the vault of the Della Torre father and son, who died in 1506 and in 1511 respectively, carried on throughout the same period and may have been finished before Marcantonio’s death, considering that the biographical episodes figuring therein are inspired by the life of the father but not the son. The taste for decorative classical art was widespread in late fifteenth-century Italy, yet Il Riccio appropriated the style broadly, imaginatively and in his own way with elegance. The art historians Planiscig and Enking have found points in common between the candelabrum and the equally imaginative woodcuts that accompany the famous Venetian Manutius edition of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, which we will discuss in the following section.\(^\text{13}\)

The ‘Santo’ candelabrum and the Della Torre family vault

In Saxl’s opinion, the bas-relief on the Paschal candelabrum (Figure 3) undoubtedly shows a scene of sacrifice. A group of devotees dressed in classical garments crowds around the altar. One man opposite the altar on the left side is kneeling and leading an animal to be sacrificed ‘in the correct ritual manner of the Romans’. Behind him, also on his knees, is someone who Saxl identifies as the *victimarius*, as he is wearing a wreath. Another man is bearing a chalice to collect the blood of the victim. It is interesting to note how the work springs from the collaboration between Il Riccio and a learned man working in the Paduan region, the philosopher Giovan Battista de Leone. De Leone belonged to an intellectual circle from Padua, which included Ermolao Barbaro, Giovan Battista Ramusio, Pietro Bembo and Giovanni Battista della Torre. Together with Niccolò Leoniceno, he was selected to act as tutor to the future cardinal, young Reginald Pole, later one of the princes of the Roman Church and candidate for the papacy in the years in which Leoniceno frequented the Studium of Padua.\(^\text{14}\)

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The strong pagan influence of this group of intellectuals can, according to Saxl, be proved by the way in which, in Leoniceno’s dialogue *Alverotus*, the protagonists Battista della Torre, Alverotti and de Leone comment on the verses of the sixth book of *The Aeneid*, regarding the descent of the soul to the underworld and subsequent rise to heaven, in neo-Platonic terms without referring, save superficially in passing, to Christian doctrine. Saxl emphasises how both de Leone and Leoniceno were passionately fond of art and both great collectors of antiquities and old manuscripts. Among other items in de Leone’s collection, there is an artefact featuring Solomon in the act of ordering a soldier with an unsheathed sword to cut in two the child who was the object of the famous contention. The theme of the judgement of Solomon would appear, in Saxl’s opinion, to be expressed in sacrificial terms.\(^\text{15}\)

The eight bas-reliefs realised by Il Riccio for the Della Torre vault were transported to France by Napoleon and are currently kept in the Louvre. Saxl dwells firstly upon the personality of the clients. The tomb in fact accommodates both father and son; the father is Girolamo Della Torre, a famous doctor who treated some of the most distinguished families in Padua. His funeral oration, for example, was by Pierio Valeriano, a versatile polyhedral humanist, who was competent in astronomy, hieroglyphics and scholar of Antiquity under Belluno. Pierio’s oration ‘is slightly pagan in character … but gives us the entirely Catholic appeal for a Christian father to his son’.\(^\text{16}\) Stronger and more captivating is the personality of Marcantonio (1479-1511), who died young and was buried in the same vault as his father. He was also a doctor, specialising in anatomy, as well as being an expert in botany and classical languages, in those days a quite common combination. In spite of his youth, he had already distinguished himself on the basis of his qualities both as a teacher and scholar. He was kind and peaceable, a trait which particularly struck all those who met him. Marcantonio was a so-called ‘genius in embryo’, and only death stopped him from embarking upon a glorious future. In fact, he had just moved to Riva del Garda when a pestilential epidemic broke out, to which the young doctor also fell victim through contact with his patients. The historian Paolo Giovio, one of his pupils in the Studium of Padua, dedicated a biography in the *Vite* to him. Girolamo Fracastoro foretold his fame for posterity, also dedicating some verses to him.\(^\text{17}\) Marcantonio’s brothers are also figures of

interest: Giulio was a jurist and engraved medals, Giovan Battista a philosopher and astronomer.

The bronze panels are clearly of pagan inspiration, representing meditation through images, that is, the passing of Girolamo della Torre into an afterworld. In the first panel, Girolamo is depicted teaching at the foot of a statue of Minerva, together with Apollo and another god/goddess, perhaps Hygeia, with a book and a sceptre in her hands. In the second panel, Parca (Morta, the goddess of death in Roman mythology) can be seen severing the thread linking Girolamo to life, while he is surrounded by friends. The third scene, from our point of view by far the most important, is a grand sacrificial scene (Figure 4). Lambs, pigs and an ox are about to be sacrificed. There is no divinity to be seen on the altar, however, the presence of a serpent leads one to think of Asclepius, the god who protected physicians. Saxl emphasises how the three above-mentioned animals were those of a kind usually sacrificed to Asclepius. It might be hypothesised that Asclepius was given the task of assisting the rise of the dead person’s soul to heaven, a task that Giorgio Valla in his 1488 *Medicinae liber* also considered to be proper for this deity. The next panels show a strong pagan inclination as well. They depict the burial of both Della Torres, the purification, the passage by boat to the hereafter, the literary and musical life in the afterlife and the victory of Fama, the goddess or personification of Fame and Renown, over death. Saxl cannot help noting how this work reveals a complete rejection of the medieval iconography of death, founded on judgement and infernal suffering, in favour of a type of imagerie, taking up and exploiting the pagan models.\(^{18}\)

### Anatomy and sacrifice

In my opinion the sacrificial scene figuring in one of the panels of the Della Torre vault shows clear and unmistakable similarities with the Vesalian woodcut. The sacrificial table occupies the same position as the anatomical one. The kneeling servants are in the same place and the sacrificing priest has an identical position to that of the anatomist, even holding his arms in a similar way while the same crowd of spectators is gathered around. The anatomist’s assistants are preparing the animals to be sacrificed, as are those of the priest. The goat, the dog and the monkey have been replaced with


Marcantonio graduated in philosophy in Padua in 1507 and in medicine in 1511. After having taught theory of medicine in Padua, he obtained the professorship in this subject in Pavia.
pigs and dogs in the sacrificial scene depicted by Il Riccio, but the arrangement, the attitudes of the characters and the distribution of the spaces in the bas-relief are similar to the woodcut. This similarity is slightly attenuated by the fact that the bas-relief suggests a different spatial dimension, although depth is not completely lacking. In fact, in the background a temple with Corinthian columns can be seen, recalling those collocated inside the anatomical theatre on Vesalius’ frontispiece. The only real major difference is the absence of the large figure holding a stick in his hand, which in the second edition of the Fabrica was replaced by a scythe.

An analogous figure appears, however, in the sacrificial bas-relief located on the Paduan candelabrum for the Paschal candle. In this case, priests in the act of sacrificing are situated at the centre of the composition, while lower down, at the foot of the altar, the assistants prepare the animals to be sacrificed, while the spectators crowd around them. The sacrificial context is accentuated by the presence of the players and the altar adorned with torches. Particularly worth mentioning is the positioning of Christ above the altar, in precisely the same place at which the threatening skeleton brandishing a scythe appears in the Vesalian woodcut.

It is again Fritz Saxl who recalls the existence of a ‘Veneration of Saturn’, an anonymous (?) painting from the Milanese school. Here, Saturn is depicted at the centre of the scene, dressed as the god of the month of December, while a pig and a goat are being prepared for him as victims for sacrifice. Rather than an altar, a huge cauldron is depicted.19

Among the scenes of sacrifice that Saxl has catalogued, there is another which presents a character very similar to that present in the anatomical frontispiece. It is a sacrifice to Priapus, extracted from woodcuts that were perhaps executed by students of Il Riccio, who decorated the Aldine edition of 1499 of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili. In this case it concerns women who, in adoration of the divinity, prepare in his honour a sacrifice of the animal sacred to him, that is, an ass (Figure 5). The allusions to the theme of death and of festive or carnival-like regeneration, the allusion also being of a sexual nature, are evident here. Priapus, in fact, as well as holding a scythe in his hand (which he used for his work as a gardener) flaunts clearly discernible sexual organs, while the ass is adorned with a crown of the same fruits and flowers which in the images of Mithras spring forth directly from the wound in the jugular vein – the place where the sacrificial animal’s throat had been cut. The ass was a typically carnival-like animal. As well as being the protagonist of the so-called Feast of Fools, it was one of the ani-

mals which, adorned with crowns, was immolated during the very popular carnivalesque death ceremonies.\textsuperscript{20}

On the basis of the elements discussed above, it is possible to identify Saturn with the divinity for whom the anatomical victim of the sacrifice is destined. The traditional attributes of the god bear witness to this: the skeleton figure, the scythe, or in other cases the wide-open mouth referring to Saturn’s act of swallowing his own children. This means that here, on the frontispiece of Vesalius’ \textit{Fabrica}, Anatomy is conceived of as a sacrifice to Saturn and this is not particularly surprising, considering the fact that Saturn was pre-eminently the god of winter and dominated the season in which autopsies took place.\textsuperscript{21}

\textit{Cultures of the theatre}

In the \textit{Hypnerotomachia Poliphili} a marvellous amphitheatre is described and depicted, the structure of which evokes the building in which Renaissance public anatomy, such as presented in the Vesalian woodcut, took place. The \textit{Hypnerotomachia} is one of the most singular products of the Italian Renaissance. This literary work of neo-Platonic inspiration was printed for the first time in Venice by Aldus Manutius in 1499, in an edition accompanied by 172 woodcuts. The work, written in a composite language of Italian, Greek and Latin, can be read as a treatise on architecture, as an initiation allegory and as a story of love or a treaty on rituals. Notwithstanding the fact that the author of the work is likely to be identified as a man of the Church, the Venetian Dominican Francesco Colonna, the rituals described are exclusively pagan. Blood sacrifices figure ostensibly in the book.\textsuperscript{22}

We have seen how the Paduan sculptor Il Riccio and the physicians Girolamo and Marcantonio della Torre all belonged to the same circles. The

\textsuperscript{22} The creators of the drawings from which the woodcuts of the Poliphilus were derived have not been convincingly identified. Cf. F. Colonna, \textit{Hypnerotomachia Poliphili} (Venice, 1499). An excellent modern edition is F. Colonna, \textit{Francesco Colonna. Hypnerotomachia Poliphili}, ed. M. Ariani and M. Gabriele (Milan, 1998, 2004), which has a translation in modern Italian and is remarkable for its rich variety of comments. From a philological point of view, and as regards the problem of the still uncertain origin of the drawings, a fundamental edition is F. Colonna, \textit{Hypnerotomachia Poliphili}, ed. L.A. Ciapponi and G. Pozzi, (Padua, 1980). The amphitheatre is described and shown starting on page 346 of the Ariani-Gabriele edition.
presumed author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, almost certainly also came from the area around Venice. The woodcuts accompanying the work from the very first special edition of the *Poliphilo*, printed in 1499 in Venice by Manuzio, are likewise from the Venetian school. Lastly, Andreas Vesalius was Paduan by adoption, while the illustrations that accompany the *De humani corporis fabrica*, including the extraordinary frontispiece, again come from the area. Not to be overlooked is the fact that one of the Paduan intellectuals inspiring Il Riccio, was precisely that same Leoniceno who had made a mark for himself translating Galen from Greek into Latin, a translation often consulted by Vesalius in his Parisian years. Collectors of antiquities, scholars of philology, lovers of Greek and Roman art and literature, were all convinced that the patrimony of scientific knowledge had yet to be discovered and utilised, and it is precisely these men who were induced by their very culture to constantly reflect on the idea of blood sacrifice. The question we might ask at this point is: what does this sacrificial view of anatomy, elaborated by circles known for their esoteric inclination and for their cultic reverence of Antiquity, have to do with the reality and popular perception of Renaissance dissections, especially of those that are defined as 'public' or 'theatrical'? To answer this question, it is first necessary to observe the fact that the anatomy of the theatre was more than a scientific or academic event. It was, as has been pointed out above, also a carnival ritual. In Medicean Pisa, where the periodic occurrence of a public dissection is documented in detail, rituals not unlike those in other university towns such as Padua or Rome were carried out. The preparation for the dissection began in the month of December, when the assistant rector of the *studium* wrote to the members of the highest Florentine criminal magistracy, the Otto of Balia. They requested the bodies of young people condemned to death, to be retrieved after their execution in order to use them for dissection in anatomy. The Otto in turn took steps to inform the Bargelli, the local criminal au-

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23 While the work has been attributed from time to time to Leon Battista Alberti or to a certain Francesco Colonna from Rome by Maurizio Calvesi, Giovanni Pozzi’s identification of the author with a Dominican friar born in Venice seems to be the most likely. For a close examination of the question of the author of the Poliphilus, cf. Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia*, ed. Ariani and Gabriele, pp. LXIII-XC.

authorities, about the request. If everything was approved, the selected victims were taken to Pisa at the beginning of January.

By then, the town was already immersed in festivities, with young people from Pisan families preparing for the Gioco del Ponte. Members of the Florentine fraternity, a group of people from Florence who lived in Pisa, took the convict into custody and looked after him the night before the execution. The execution itself was carried out in secret. Care was taken not to proceed violently or crudely, as the corpses had to remain intact for the ‘exercises’ of the anatomists, and the convict’s blood had to be specifically preserved for the anatomical ritual. A procession through the streets of the town took place, in which the university students and comforters took the body to the anatomical theatre, not coincidentally passing over the same bridge on which a ritual battle was played out during the Gioco del Ponte. Inside the theatre, students and university physicians, together with the common spectators, were all waiting for the anatomical performance to begin. The anatomist, dressed in a black cloak, performed the dissection in a dark, almost sorcerous atmosphere. The magistri assisted him, while lower servants were in charge of all the gruesome operations connected with the anatomy, such as the boiling of the corpse to obtain white bones for the construction of a skeleton. The dissecting went on for about fifteen days and was accompanied by medical, philosophical and theological discussions. Among those who attended were philosophers such as the Aristotelian Simone Porzio and artists such as Giorgio Vasari. In Padua the presence of philosophers like Pomponazzi is documented. In the end what was left of the dismembered corpse was buried in a church next to the amphitheatre. It is possible, however, that at the end of the ritual, pieces of the body were distributed among the spectators. Inquisitorial sources in Pisa have revealed that shreds or scraps of flesh from the anatomised body were purloined to be used in magic rituals, in particular for amorous charms.25

The most recent studies on anatomy in the theatre present different interpretations of the anatomical ritual and its performance during the carnival period. According to Giovanni Ferrara, the author of a pioneering article on this issue, the fact that anatomy took place during the carnival period might be explained in the light of some details of the carnival revealed by the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. Andrea Carlino, however, recognises in the alleged ecclesiastic prohibition of the dissections, the persistent mani-

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festation of a cultural taboo with regard to the opening up of bodies. In Carlino’s opinion, such interdictions could only be rescinded during carnival time, the season *par excellence* during which rules and regulations are broken. These different interpretations also reflect the ways in which the frontispiece has been explained by various scholars. While Giovanni Ferrara underlines the correlation between the woodcut and the Renaissance vision of carnival suggested by Bakhtin, Sawday sees in the woodcut an allusion to the Renaissance idea of the body as a microcosm in a twofold sense: architectonical and astronomical, or rather ‘Vitruvian’ and ‘Copernican’.26

In my work the festive element of anatomy is explained by comparing the public anatomical ritual as it took place in Pisa with the so-called ceremonies of death occurring in the carnival, as studied by James Frazer and Paolo Toschi. In these ceremonies, a puppet-figure representing carnival was put to death. Sometimes the figure was replaced by a living animal or even by a convict. For a long time in Venice, an unusual ritual took place on the Thursday before Lent: a bull and twelve pigs were killed in the square next to St. Mark’s, in front of the Doge. From records it is known that in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Rome, there was always someone available to be executed during carnival. The role of a carnival victim may even have befallen Giordano Bruno, who was executed in Campo de’ Fiori on the Thursday before Lent in 1608. One can imagine that the gag, which hindered speech, *also* acted as a form of bizarre mask. In my opinion it is not inappropriate to speak here of sacrifice. Assessing these kinds of rituals one could remark that sacrifices were not only celebrated on distant islands by cannibals or in the New World territories of the Aztecs, but also in the very heart of Renaissance Italy.27

With regard to the anatomical theatre, the sacrificial image of anatomy suggested by the reflections of the humanists and artists from Padua may be


complemented by carnival and folk rituals. An allusion to the sacrificial scene can be observed in another famous woodcut of the *De humani corporis fabrica*. In the second edition (1555), Marsyas is killed and his flesh is stripped from his body by Apollo. Also in this case, we are dealing with the revival of a typical theme of sixteenth-century *imagerie*, the origin of which was classical. The complexity of the cross-references present in this scene reinforces my impression that the person who envisioned the iconography of the *De humani corporis fabrica* intended to transfer into images not only, as O’Malley supposes, a technological-scientific vision, but also classical culture with antiquary and scholarly traits.

Works such as *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by the physician François Rabelais or the *Baldus* by the Venetian Benedictine monk Teofilo Folengo show how, in the Renaissance period, folk and elite cultures exchanged themes and visions of the world, within a fundamental context of what has been defined as ‘plurilingualism’. One place where languages and cultures could meet and evolve was the anatomy theatre. In more general terms, one could speak of ‘cultures of the theatre’, referring to multidisciplinary learning – namely, artistic, juridical, criminological, medico-scientific, philosophical and religious, not to mention folk culture, witchcraft and carnival lore – that comes to life within the ritual context of the dissections in the theatre.\(^28\)

Epilogue: Leonardo and Della Torre

Who was the creator – or who were the creators – of the illustrations that accompany the *De humani corporis fabrica*? The question is complex and basically still unresolved today. Among names which have been mentioned, are Titian, and Jan van Kalkar, a German cutter and painter who lived in Venice for a long time and who had already collaborated with Vesalius for

\(^{28}\) The concept of plurilingualism was developed by M.M. Bakhtin, *L’opera di Rabelais e la cultura popolare comica. Riso, carnevale e festa nella tradizione medioevale e rinascimentale*, transl. M. Romano (Turin, 1979). Pointing out how studies on theatre anatomy concentrated on the anatomical theatres as ‘sites of disruption, raucous outburst and bawdy display’ and how they heavily insisted on the carnival-like aspects of anatomy, Cynthia Klestinec does not take into account the plurilingual nature of the event which in my opinion should have included both cultural and ‘civil’ aspects as well as popular and carnival-like aspects (C. Klestinec, ‘Civility, Comportment, and the Anatomy Theater. Girolamo Fabrici and His Medical Students in Renaissance Padua’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 60 (2007), pp. 434-463. Moreover, it is not true, contrary to what is maintained by Klestinec, that the only sources used by the scholars of theatre anatomy were the Bolognese sources pointed out by Giovanna Ferrari: Andrea Carlino used Roman sources; I myself made use of the historical archives in Pisa.
the woodcuts of the *Tabulae sex*. According to Saunders and O’Malley, who has tried to piece together, as it were, the two hypotheses, the illustrations are not the work of one hand but rather the fruit of a collaboration between a group of artists, in all probability from the school of Titian and in some way influenced by the great *Maestro*: van Kalkar also figures among these, his dealings with Titian having been proven elsewhere.29

It has also been suggested, however, that another protagonist from the Italian Renaissance may have taken part in the creation of this unmatched iconographic work of art. It is known, in fact, that Leonardo was planning to write and illustrate an important treaty on anatomy. The work was not finished because the young physician with whom Leonardo was working on this project died unexpectedly. The Leonardesque anatomic tables thus passed into the hands of Francesco di Melzo, the artist’s favourite pupil. Currently they constitute the famous *Windsor folios*, property of the English royal family, the Windsors (and preserved in Windsor Castle).30 It has been hypothesised that the illustrators of *De humani corporis fabrica* may have seen them and furthermore that the Vesalian illustrations are nothing but ‘a flagrant and gigantic plagiarism from the drawings prepared by Leonardo’.31

Some precious indications of this have been furnished by Giorgio Vasari. In the second edition of his *Vite* (1568) he writes that Leonardo ‘he then dedicated himself, but with greater attention, to the anatomy of humans (…) that he dissected with his own hand and drew with extreme care’. In this anatomical work Leonardo collaborated with ‘an excellent philosopher, who at that time was teaching in Pavia and also writing on this subject’. This philosopher was ‘one of the first (…) who began to illustrate matters of

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30 The historian Paolo Giovio, who had studied medicine in Padua under the tuition of Pomponazzi and Della Torre, described the work of Leonardo as anatomist thus: ‘Secare quoque noxiorum hominum cadavera in ipsis medicorum scholis inhumano foedoque labore didicerat, ut varii membrorum flexus et conatus ex vi nervorum vertebrarumque naturali ordine pingerentur. Propterea particularum omnium formam in tabellis, usque ad exiles venulas interioraque ossium, mira solertia figuravit, ut ex eo tot annorum opere (infinita exempla) ad artis utilitatem typis aeneis excuderentur’; [‘he had also learned with great difficulty and disgust how to dissect the corpses of the criminals, so as to be able to draw the various flexions and tensions of the limbs with nerves and joints, following scrupulously the order of nature. He thus depicted in anatomical tables, with marvellous detail, the form of all the smaller organs, even down to the finest veins and the innermost parts of the skeleton, in order that, from that first age-old effort, by means of copper-plate engraving, an infinite number of copies could be made for the benefit of art.’]; cf. P. Giovio, ‘Leonardi Vincii Vita’, in: C. Vecce ed., *Leonardo* (Rome, 1998), pp. 355-356.
medicine with the doctrine of Galen and to shed light on real anatomy, up to that time shrouded in ignorance; to this purpose he made brilliant use of the intelligence and talent of Leonardo who turned these anatomical researches into a book, the images of which were drawn with a red pencil and contoured in ink'.

Behind the words of Vasari, one can discern the ambitious project of a general treatise on anatomy conceived by an artist already advanced in age, but still as curious and ingenuous as in his youth, who was unable, however, to carry it through to completion. Collaborating with him was a physician and anatomist young enough to have been his son, particularly expert and competent in spite of his youth, trained at the same university (Padua) where Andreas Vesalius later taught, who was in that period a professor in Pavia and whose promising career was suddenly and fatefuly cut short by his death – this was none other than that same Marcantonio della Torre whose tomb was decorated by Il Riccio.  

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33 Vasari does not mention a relationship between Della Torre and Leonardo in the first edition of ‘The Lives’, G. Vasari, Le vite de piu eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori Italiani, da Cimabue insino a’ tempi nostri (Florence, 1550). Minozio is sceptical about the possible relationship between Della Torre and Leonardo (Giovio, Elogio, pp. 173-174), following the suggestions of Teach Gnudi, ‘Torre’. Nevertheless, Teach Gnudi’s assertion that two men of different ages and experience cannot work together seems to me to be unacceptable. More convincing, yet equally as irresolute, is the ‘ex silentio’ argumentation of Minozio, according to whom Giovio does not relate the episode in the biography of Della Torre, nor in the biography of Leonardo. E. Panofsky, ‘Artist, Scientist, Genius. Notes on the Renaissance Dämmerung’, in: K. Ferguson ed., The Renaissance. Six Essays (New York, 1962), pp. 123-182, see pp. 162-163, notes how the Fabrica of Vesalius had strictly artistic purposes, as well as technical and didactical aims. Panofsky theorises, amongst other things, about the existence of a specific relationship between the artists who produced the Vesalian tables and the anatomical tables of Leonardo, which the Vesalian artists would have had access to – a thesis discussed and criticised by Harcourt, ‘Vesalius’.
1. Frontispiece Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica* (Basle, 1543).
2. Frontispiece Andreas Vesalius, *De humani corporis fabrica* (Basle, 1555).
5. Sacrificial scene, in: F. Colonna, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (Venice 1499).