The Vesalius Family

Franciscus and Anna: Andreas Vesalius’ brother and sister in the spotlight

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The ancestors of Andreas Vesalius

In the past, most genealogists and historians with a special interest in Andreas Vesalius and his family have mainly focused on the origins and ancestry of our great anatomist, who reformed the teaching of anatomy and used both historical sources and his own observations in his critical research.

Such an approach to the figure of Vesalius is of course a valuable one. Thus we know from official deeds of sale and inheritance that the roots of the Vesalius medical family lay in the town of Wesel in the Duchy of Cleves, in what is now the Rhineland. Wesel is close to the border with The Netherlands (Holland). At the time of the Vesalius family the common language was Dutch or better Flemish; it was only under the Prussian rule that they were forced to use the German language.

His great-grandfather Joannes or Jan Wytinc(k) or van Wesele was one of the first intake of Professors at the Medical Faculty, established in 1426 at the University of Leuven, one year after its foundation. Jan van Wesele, who received his doctorate in the Arts in Cologne in 1424 and was awarded the degree of Doctor of Medicine at Pavia in 1427, was professor in Leuven from 1429 to 1443. In 1443 he appointed a temporary deputy, but when he wished to take up his post again his deputy refused to give way to him. Jan van Wesele then became the City Doctor of the City of Brussels. Later a life-size wooden statue of him, carved in Russian oak by the Goyens brothers from Leuven, was placed in the marriage hall of the Brussels city hall. During his lifetime Jan van Wesele acquired many properties in the Duchy of Brabant such as ‘Ter Holst’, a farmstead built around a square courtyard in Maleizen-Overijse, the ‘Steenbergen’ manor with its castle (now the ‘Het Spaans Dak’ restaurant), fields, forests and lakes, and a few houses in Leuven including the ‘Rattemanspoort’. He is best known for his treatise on the plague and a work on astrology.

His grandfather Everard Wytinck, known as van Wesele, became Doctor to the Court of Archduke Maximilian of Austria (1459-1519), who was ruler of the Low Countries, and to
his wife Mary of Burgundy (1457-1482). All the children of Everard were illegitimate and consequently unable to inherit. He died in Brussels in 1484 but was buried in Leuven.

Parents

His father, Andreas senior, who was born in Brussels in 1479 as the son of Margaretha s’Winters, was therefore only 5 years old on the death of his father Everard. He was probably brought up by his aunt and uncles, who had inherited the entire property of their brother Everard. On 30 August 1492 he was enrolled in the University of Leuven at the Castle college. He became chamberlain and apothecary to Margaret of Austria, who was Governess of the Low Countries. After King Charles I, who was later to become Emperor Charles V, was declared to have reached the age of majority in 1515, he became Apothecary to King Charles and from that time onwards it was his duty to accompany the King during his travels, military campaigns and periods of residence. We have documentary evidence that he was in Valladolid in 1517, in Mainz in 1521, back in Spain in 1522 and in Nice in 1538, where he presented six anatomical plates by his son, our Andreas junior, to the Emperor.

Andreas senior married Elisabeth or Isabel Crabbé, who came from an important Brussels family. She was the daughter of Jacob and Catharina Sweerts.

In October 1531, at the age of 52, Andreas senior was legitimated by the Emperor. In recognition of his faithful service, he did not have to pay the usual duty for the certificate.

During their marriage, Andreas van Wesele and Elisabeth or Isabel Crabbé had four children: Nicolas, Andreas junior, Franciscus and Anna.

The brothers and sister of our anatomist

Nicolas, the oldest son, became an apothecary like his father. Almost nothing is known about him. All we know is that in 1526 he became a burgher of Brussels.

Franciscus was born in about 1521. He was probably "born with a helmet" (a caul or part of the amniotic sac), and it is Franciscus to whom Andreas refers in his Fabrica when he relates that he had seen how his mother carefully preserved the dried amniotic sac that was found on the head of one of her children at the time of birth. At that time to be born with a caul was seen as a sign of good fortune, a portent of a sparkling career.

The first trace of Franciscus is found in the matriculation records of the University of Leuven, when he matriculated on 31 August 1536 as ‘Franciscus Wesalius de Bruxella’ in the
Castle school (‘Castrum’). This coincides with Andreas’ return from Paris. After completing his studies in the arts, Franciscus began to train as a lawyer, at the insistence of his parents.

By his own account, Franciscus studied law at various universities – against his will – travelled extensively and acquired a considerable knowledge of languages. After 1540, we find him in Italy, namely at the University of Ferrara, but he also attended public dissections presented by his brother Andreas in various cities, including Padua, Pisa and Bologna. From that point on he decided to devote himself to medicine and, working on his brother’s behalf, to defending the Fabrica against criticism by all possible means. With a dedication to Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici, he arranged for the ‘China Root Epistle’, which had been written by Andreas to his friend Joachim Roelants from Mechelen, to be printed by Oporinus in Basel. In it, Andreas sets out his views on the medical properties of the China root, but more importantly fends off attacks from his former teacher, Jacobus Sylvius, on his criticism of Galen’s unscientific claims.

In the summer of 1552 we find Franciscus in Vienna, where an outbreak of the plague claimed 16,000 victims. On 2 July 1552 he was appointed ‘Magister Sanitatis’ or ‘Pestarzt’ (plague doctor) by the Faculty of Medicine, since no-one in the medical profession attached to the faculty was prepared to take on the role. Franciscus became the victim of his own courage, dying of the plague after writing his will on 6 November 1552. He was buried in the ‘Minoritenkirche’ (Minorites’ Church) in Vienna. We have been able to obtain a copy of his will and the deed of its official opening by Professor Mathias Cornax, dean of the Faculty of Medicine, on 30 December 1552. These documents are kept in the Vienna University Archive.

According to the will, Franciscus was possibly married and had a son.

To commemorate the plague epidemics of the 16th century, the ‘Di Patri Creatori’ (‘Pesturm’ or ‘Pestsäule’) was erected on a square close to the ‘Sankt Stephan Domkirche’ (St. Stephen’s Cathedral).

We first encounter Andreas’ younger sister Anna at the Court of Emperor Charles V, where she entered into service on 21 October 1551 as the ‘lavandera de corps’, i.e. the person responsible for the Emperor’s personal washing and hygiene. She is mentioned on the payroll of the Imperial Court as Anne Vesalins, then as Ana Vesalius on her dismissal in June 1556 after the abdication of Charles V, as Anna van Wesel on her epitaph in the St. Livinus Monster Church in Zierikzee (1585) and as Anna van Wesele on her husband's epitaph in the Collegiate Church of St. Michael and St. Gudula in Brussels (1570).
She married Nicolaus Bonart, who was in the Emperor’s service as chamberlain and ‘barbero de corps’ or ‘barbitonsor’ (chief barber or beard trimmer) from 1 January 1544. Both of them thus held responsible positions, particularly from the point of view of security.

Her salary was one-fifth of that received by her brother Andreas as ‘medico de familia’ (family physician). Her husband Nicolaus received a salary twice that of his wife Anna. Anna was allocated a budget for her work expenses. Her ration was two loaves of bread, a portion of wine and four pounds of meat on meat days and two pounds of fish and 6 eggs on fish days.

Her husband Nicolaus Bonart came from Zeelandic Flanders. He first entered service as chamberlain to René de Chalon, who was the first Prince of Orange from 1530 onwards. The Prince died in the Emperor’s service at the battle of Saint-Dizier on 18 July 1544. At that time Nicolaus Bonart had already been on the payroll of the Court of Emperor Charles for six months. He was recommended to the Emperor by the Prince of Orange. Bonart had to accompany the Emperor during his military campaigns, at the Imperial Diets, at ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Fleece, in other words on all the Emperor's travels.

The ‘barberos’ also had daily duties concerning nightcaps, nightwear and other services rendered during the night. They were also responsible for winding the clocks.

On 13 May 1553, Nicolaus Bonart was appointed bailiff of the City of Zierikzee in Zeeland, but arranged for someone to deputise for him.

On 21 April 1556 he was raised to the nobility by Charles V. Officially he was given the rank of ‘Imperial military nobleman and combatant in tournaments’. He was also given a new, well defined and appropriate coat of arms. We found the certificate in the Court and State Archives in Vienna.

On the abdication of Charles V, Nicolaus and Anna were relieved of their duties at Court.

The couple had four children: Charlotte, Anna, Chrétien and Nicolas. In Brussels, they became the owners of ‘Cantersteen’, the estate of a large mansion which included shops, gardens, stables and associated properties. Nicolaus Bonaert died in Brussels on 25 December 1570 and was buried at the church of St. Gudula. Anna moved to Zierikzee, where Simon de Gousman, who had married her daughter Charlotte, had taken the post of bailiff. Anna died in Zierikzee on 4 March 1585 and was buried there at the St. Lievens-Monsterkerk (‘Saint Livinus Monster church’). Their descendants continued to move in aristocratic circles and held important political and social positions.
The household of Andreas Vesalius and Anna van Hamme

In about 1544-45 our anatomist married Anna van Hamme, the daughter of Hieronymus (d. 1.08.1568), Councillor of the Council of Brabant and Auditor of the Imperial Audit Office in Brussels, and of Anna Asseliers (d. 3.10.1524), the daughter of Philip and Julienne van Eesbeeck.

In Brussels, close to Andreas’ birthplace in the Hellestraetken, now known as the Miniemenstraat, they built a large mansion, named ‘tHuys van Vesalius’, and planted large orchards.

They had a single child, Anna Vesalius, who was reportedly given ‘tHuys van Vesalius’ as a dowry on her marriage to Squire Jan de Mol, who was the son of Martin, Head Falconer to the Emperor, and Anna van Olmen, who lived in Tervuren. Jan de Mol became an alderman of the City of Brussels (1578), from 1579 was bailiff of the towns and the country of Diest and Zichem, and later also Head Falconer to the Court.

On her early death, after bequeathing ‘tHuys van Vesalius’ to her husband on 4 June 1577, Anna Vesalius left five children who were still minors: Hendrick, Jaspar, Anna, Adriana and Elisabeth. With the permission of the children’s guardians and for the benefit of the children, the Vesalius house was sold by their father Jan de Mol on 4 April 1587 to the City of Brussels, whose Magistrate was empowered in a resolution dated 12 March 1585 to purchase and endow it, which occurred soon afterwards on 5 April 1587, when it was given to Count Peter Ernest von Mansfelt as a mark of gratitude for Peter Ernest’s services as Governor of the City of Brussels and those of his son, Karl von Mansfelt, during the unrest of 1566.

After the death of Andreas Vesalius on 15 October 1564 on the island of Zakynthos, his widow Anna van Hamme was married in the Church of the Chapel (‘Kapellekerk’) in Brussels on 24 July 1565 to Squire Hendryck vander Meeren. Anna van Hamme died between 1600 and 1604.