Girolamo Fabrici (1537-1619) [1]


Girolamo Fabrici [5], known as Hieronymus Fabricius in Latin, was given the surname Aquapendente from the city where he was born, near Orvieto, Italy. Born in 1533, Fabrici was the eldest son of a respected noble family, whose coat of arms appears as an illustration in the title page of Fabrici’s book on embryology [6], De formato foetu. Little is known of Fabrici’s parents. His father is recorded as Fabricio, and Fabrici is said to have been named for his paternal grandfather. Fabrici influenced many scientists and physicians of his time to consider embryology [6] as a legitimate and independent subject, and his two illustrated treatises on embryology [6] are a remarkable legacy of his investigations on the development and comparative anatomy of fetuses.

In 1550 Fabrici’s family sent him to the University of Padua [7] where he studied Greek, Latin, philosophy, and logic under the patronage of the Venetian family Lippomano. His success in his lessons led the family to continue to support him while he ventured into studies of medicine. In 1559 Fabrici obtained his doctorate in medicine and philosophy from the University of Padua [7], and he continued to study under the famous professor of anatomy Gabriele Fallopio [8] until Fallopio’s death in 1562. The following year, Fabrici began to conduct private lessons in anatomy until he was appointed the chair of surgery by the Venetian Senate on 10 April 1565. His first public course in anatomy was taught from 18 December to 5 January 1566. William Harvey [9], who later became known for his studies in anatomy and embryology [6], was one of Fabrici’s notable pupils.

Fabrici’s fame and salary continued to grow with his success and his reappointment as the chair of anatomy within the University. He was admitted to the College of Philosophy and Medicine 12 May 1584, when he resigned his position as the chair of surgery in favor of Julius Casserius. By 1589 however, Fabrici was reappointed to the chair for the fourth time. In 1594 Fabrici published his surgical works in the Operationes chirurgicae, printed in Venice in 1619. Despite his success, Fabrici was separated by formal decree, and Fabrici retained only the title of Professor Supraordinarius of anatomy. In 1609 the chair of anatomy and surgery were brought under the control of the Venetian Senate, and Fabrici continued to deliver his lectures in anatomy until he was made a knight of St. Mark by the Republic of Venice in 1607 for treating the wounds of the Italian patriot and church reformer Paolo Sarpi.

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After serving the University of Padua [7] for nearly fifty years and accruing an impressive professional reputation, Fabrici retired from teaching in November of 1613. He continued publishing his research, although he suffered a number of illnesses throughout the coming years. Fabrici married a woman named Violante Vidal and although they never bore any children of their own, they adopted Fabrici’s grand-niece, Semidea. Prior to his marriage to Violante, Fabrici had fathered an illegitimate son, Francesco, with whom he did not have a good relationship. His wife passed away in 1618, and soon after his adopted niece Semidea was married, Fabrici died at his estate in Venice 21 May 1619. He was buried next to his wife on 23 May 1619 in Padua at the west cloister of the church of Sanfrancesco. After Semidea died 4 January 1620, Fabrici’s remaining heirs left his tomb unnamed and never erected the altar he had requested in his last will.

Fabrici is known for his fame as a surgeon and for his two illustrative treatises on embryology [6]. His career as an anatomist and professor left him a legacy of impressive academic achievement, and his works in comparative embryology [6] remain a historical artifact of his investigations in human development.