

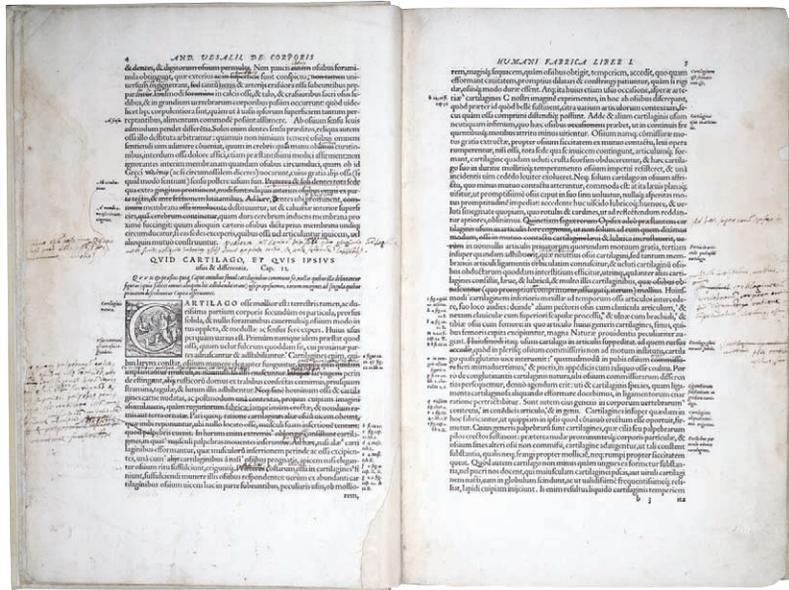
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## A SPECTACULAR NEW ARRIVAL

Philip Oldfield

Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

**L**AST JANUARY AN imposing folio was brought to the Fisher Library by a collector who wished to place the volume on long-term deposit. The book in question, a copy of the 1555 edition of Andreas Vesalius's *De humani corporis fabrica*, printed and published by Johannes Oporinus of Basel, was acquired by the collector at auction in Germany in 2007. For the Fisher to receive a copy of the 1555 edition is a noteworthy event in itself, but this was no ordinary copy, for, as it turned out, it had been extensively annotated by Vesalius himself. When we first heard about the book we were naturally skeptical. How, we reasoned, could a copy of *De fabrica*,

allegedly annotated by its author, remain undetected for four and a half centuries? The same doubt was initially expressed by Vivian Nutton, Emeritus Professor of the History of Medicine, University College London, who was the first scholar to subject the volume to a thorough critical examination. Professor Nutton's initial skepticism was soon banished as he realized that the annotations could only have been written by Vesalius.

Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564) of Brussels, chair of Surgery and Anatomy at the University of Padua, is generally considered to be the founder of modern anatomy. His *De humani corporis fabrica*, first published in 1543,

is unquestionably one of the most important books in the history of medicine, and one of the wonders of Renaissance book production. Drawing on his practical experience as a dissector, Vesalius succeeded in laying a new foundation for anatomical study based on first-hand observation. He broke with the prevailing anatomical theories of the second-century physician Galen that were based in large part on the dissection of animals, and set anatomical study upon an empirically scientific course. *De fabrica* was a perfect marriage of text and illustration. Beautifully printed by Johannes Oporinus of Basel, the book was illustrated by magnificent woodcuts,

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**OPENING PAGE:** Illustrated title page and pages annotated by Vesalius from the 1555 edition of *De humani corporis fabrica*. **RIGHT:** Full view of posterior muscles and enlargement showing Vesalius's redrawing of the outline of the toe.

masterfully wrought by the best craftsmen of the day, from drawings thought to have been executed by Jan van Calcar, a pupil of Titian, and fellow countryman of Vesalius. The book was unlike anything that had gone before, and was immediately acclaimed as a masterpiece. The outstanding woodcut illustrations set a new standard for anatomical illustration, and were widely copied for the next three centuries.

Despite its high cost, the 1543 edition satisfied consumer demands for twelve years. In 1555 a new edition was prepared, containing many revisions and corrections of some of the errors of the 1543 edition, and including a number of improvements to the woodcut illustrations. The book was given a new illustrated title page depicting the tumultuous scene of a dissection being conducted by Vesalius at Padua.

The 1555 copy of *De fabrica* on deposit at the Fisher contains over a thousand interlinear and marginal annotations, in the form of additions, deletions and transpositions. There is scarcely a page that does not have some kind of revision on it. In his analysis of the annotations, Professor Nutton concluded that in addition to amending typographical errors, or repositioning the wrong placement of captions and printed marginal notes, most of the notes amount to stylistic improvements, which do not affect the essential meaning of an idea, but express it much more elegantly and succinctly. Many words are replaced with more precise terms, and many of the deletions make the text more concise. The annotations entail the addition of a large number of adverbs or adverbial phrases—evidence of Vesalius's mastery of the Latin language.

In addition to the many stylistic changes, a good deal of anatomical information has been inserted or revised in light of Vesalius's own studies and reading since 1555. Some of the more interesting annotations relate to the illustrations—an indication of the care Vesalius lavished on all aspects of his book. He was at pains to instruct the woodblock cutter not to obscure the musculature of his figures with letters that key the illustration to

the text. In one place Vesalius even provides a redrawing of the outline of the toe to guide the woodblock cutter. In addition there are extensive proof corrections to the captions that accompany the illustrations.

An examination of the annotations leads inevitably to the conclusion that only Vesalius could have been their author. Such a logical conclusion is supported by the forensic evidence provided by a comparison of Vesalius's handwriting in a group of letters preserved at the University of Uppsala, with that in the notes in *De fabrica*. The case for Vesalius as annotator is incontrovertible.

This special volume provides us with a fascinating glimpse of Vesalius at work. He is seen constantly attempting to improve his text both scientifically, and stylistically, and to make it clearer and more accessible to his readers. He obviously spent a great deal of time in revising his text, but precisely how long is not known, since none of the annotations are dated. It seems, likely, however, that annotating ended abruptly with his death in 1564. All the evidence points to the conclusion that Vesalius was preparing a new edition of *De fabrica* that unfortunately never materialized. The fact that a third edition was never published makes the annotated copy in the Fisher all the more significant, for it represents Vesalius's final word on his great masterpiece. Its value to scholars, therefore, is immense.

The Fisher Library is most fortunate to have been chosen as the repository for this remarkable book. It will undoubtedly be the subject of much scholarly investigation, and is a reflection of the growing significance of the Fisher's medical collections. It also adds to our impressive holdings of Vesalius, which includes a copy of the first edition of *De fabrica* of 1543. The arrival of the 1555 edition is most timely, as 2014 will mark the five-hundredth anniversary of Vesalius's birth. We will be celebrating the event at the Fisher Library with an exhibition, in which the annotated copy of *De fabrica* will be prominently featured.

