

SDC 8: Vesalius' tacit acknowledgment of Colombo's discovery

In his biography of Vesalius, O'Malley described Gabriele Falloppio (1523–62) as the “spiritual disciple” of Vesalius (1514–64). He further noted that the younger contemporary, Falloppio, “had made the *Fabrica* the basic guide for his own studies” and stated that Falloppio had “restored to the Paduan anatomical chair that lustre which had been dimmed by inferior appointments after Vesalius’s departure.”^a Falloppio’s *Observationes anatomicae* (1561) was the sole literary work that he published during his lifetime. It included several important contributions to myology, particularly the arrangement and function of the muscles of the eye. The following is a translation of his description of the LPS:

Regarding the muscles of the eyelids which cover and uncover the eyes, I have erred along with Galen and the divine Vesalius and at the same time with the whole school of anatomists... In the eye of the ox...I found the single muscle [LPS] that raises the upper lid only. Becoming more skilled by this example, I discovered a small, very thin muscle in the human eye, which arises in the same place as the origin of the [superior rectus] muscle that draws the the eye straight upward. This small muscle, ending in a very wide cord, is inserted into the whole of the tarsus of the upper eyelid and, raising the lid, uncovers the eye.”^b

Like Colombo, Falloppio was also aware of the nonhuman nature of the choanoid (retractor bulbi) muscle. Unlike Colombo, Falloppio did not attribute the actions of the superior oblique as being involved in the action of eyelid opening.

In relation to Vesalius’ *Fabrica* and Colombo’s *De re anatomica*, O’Malley’s assessment of Falloppio’s *Observationes* follows:

The *Observationes* is not a general anatomical textbook but an unillustrated commentary or series of observations on the *Fabrica* of Vesalius, in which Falloppio seeks to correct errors committed or to present new material overlooked by Vesalius. The criticism is temperate and friendly so that, in his later *Examen* of the

Observationes, the “divine Vesalius,” as Falloppio calls him, indicates he had taken no offense and was amenable to justified correction and instruction. Since the *Observationes* is not an all-inclusive textbook it never received the popular acclaim given to the *De re anatomica* of Colombo, despite a number of editions, but, on the other hand, it is a work of great originality and importance.^c

Around August 1561, while serving in the court of Phillip II in Madrid, Vesalius received copies of Falloppio’s *Observationes*. He must have devoted much time to its study and to the composition of an extended reply. Just as the *Observationes* had followed the outline of Vesalius’ *Fabrica*, so too did Vesalius follow the same sequence in an extended response. The epistle was entrusted to the outgoing Venetian ambassador to Spain but it remained in Venice undelivered as Falloppio died on October 3, 1562, most likely from terminal complications of pulmonary tuberculosis. Vesalius retrieved the letter in the spring of 1564 when he passed through Venice en route to Jerusalem and he delivered it to a publisher and bookseller who would prepare it for publication while Vesalius was on his pilgrimage. It seems that the Venetian Senate was prepared to accept Vesalius back at the University of Padua in his former capacities as the positions were still vacant. While returning to Italy, Vesalius was forced ashore on the island of Zante where he perished. His posthumously published *Examen* addressed the discovery of the LPS.^d As translated by O’Malley, these were among the last words that the illustrious Vesalius sent to any publisher:

After I had heard that in **Rome** [emphasis added] a muscle had been discovered that raised the eyelid and I learned that this existed in the bony orbit, I recalled that section I had pondered in Galen’s book ... I examined [the orbicularis oculi] with more careful dissection. Thus, I noticed that no part of this circular fleshy mass is suitable for lifting the eyelids. Then in place of muscle I began to consider that wide, rounded and fleshy part in the orbit of the eye, which I described as glandular, by which we might raise the eyelid ... Thus, I considered a gland in place of a muscle for raising the eyelids [but instead] I shall now add the one you propose.^e

Reference / SDC 8

^a O'Malley CD. *Andreas Vesalius of Brussels 1514–1564*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964; 292.

^b Falloppio G. *Observationes anatomicae*. Venice: 1561; 64–5.

https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_m2QBqi7aHcQC/. Accessed June 20, 2020.

^c O'Malley CD. *op. cit.* 1964; 466n.

^d Vesalius A. *Anatomicarum Gabrielis Falloppii observationum examen*. Venice: Franciscum de Franciscus, 1564; 47–8.

https://books.google.com/books?id=o_tbAAAACAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false. Accessed July 13, 2020.

^e O'Malley CD. *op. cit.* 1964; 292–3.