The History of the School of Anatomy in Malta (1674 - 1800)

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Anatomy became a recognised discipline under the Great Alexandrians (300-250 BC), of whom Herophilus (300BC) is often considered as the Father of Anatomy. Galen (130-200AD) published numerous anatomical works which, for a long time, were used in teaching Anatomy. Teaching by dissection began with Mondino (c. 1276-1326). in the early 14th century. Modern Anatomy however, orginated in the mid-16th century when dissection became somewhat more common; Vesalius (1514-1564) is often looked upon as the Father of Modern Anatomy. Eustachius was followed by Fabricius, one of the greatest teachers of Anatomy.

Though we cannot claim that the School of Anatomy in Malta is as old as any of the great continental schools of Bologna (end of 13th century), Montpellier (end 14th), Padua or Paris (end 15th) or London (mid-16th), yet it was established only just after that of Basel, Leyden and Copenhagen (beginning of 17th). It is not generally realised that as early as 1674,* G.M. Fra Nicolas Cottoner established the first School of Anatomy (and Surgery) in Malta, at a time when many other Universities abroad still had no regular teaching of Anatomy.

The first phase in the history of anatomical teaching in Malta is from 1674 to 1798, a period of 124 years, during which great progress was made, with occasional setbacks, until the School of Anatomy in Malta came to acquire great renown throughout the principal cities of Europe. From 1798 to 1800, Malta was under the French and during this time the School of Anatomy was supressed. With the coming of the British in 1800, teaching of Anatomy was restarted and has since continued to be taught on the British system; this period of 160 years constitutes the second phase.

This historical survey of the first phase in the history of the School of Anatomy in Malta purports to throw some light on the activities going on in this School as well as on the Anatomists who occupied the Chair during the period.

During the first 50 years (1674-1725), not much progress was made in the teaching of Anatomy. According to von Zwehl, the course in Anatomy at this time was a regular, albiet not an extensive, one. Anatomy lessons were held every Thursday throughout the year and were compulsory for 'i pratici e i barberotti' of the hospital and of the galleons as well as for all the students of Surgery. In 1687 the School of Anatomy became annexed to the Hospital of the Order (Sacra Infermeria). During this period the Chair of Anatomy was first occupied by Dr. Giuseppe Zammit, of whom we know very little, and then by Dr. Giuseppe Farrugia during whose time the teaching of Anatomy fell into headlong decay, with no dissections and no demonstrations on the parts of the animal body being carried out.

The next 25 years (1725-1754) mark the 'Henin' period during which Anatomical teaching in Malta was set on a firm basis. This period is so named after Dr. Gabriele Henin who occupied the Chair during this period and who can reasonably be regarded as the Father of Anatomy in Malta. Henin was primarily a surgeon

— the Senior Surgeon of the Sacra Infermeria — but he was also the Prosector and First Teacher in the School of Anatomy. The Council of the Order sent him to Florence, at their own expense, to study Anatomy at the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova. He reurned to Malta in 1725 and G.M. Manoel de Vilhena thereupon appointed him Prosector at the School of Anatomy. For 29 years, Henin lectured, in Italian, on Anatomy (besides on Physiology and Pathology), carried out classes of dissection and demonstrations on the human body in public and performed all the postmortem examinations, besides acting as surgeon to the Hospital. His salary was 12 scudi (about £1) monthly apart from 1 rotolo of meat and 2 misure of wine daily for which he fought vehemently but all to no avail when they were withdrawn!

Henin became gravely ill in 1753 and died in October 1754. His greatest anatomical publication was 'Observatio Chirurgico-anatomica in Nosocomio S. Joanni Hyerosolymitano' (1748). A portrait of this celebrated anatomist, as well as one of his successor M.A. Grima, is found in the office of the Medical Superintendent, St. Luke Hospital.

The teaching of Anatomy in the next 20 years (1754-1763) reached rather low levels, as M.A. Grima in the introduction to his "Instituzioni d'Anatomia" points out. The Chair of Anatomy was occupied, for a few months only in 1754, by Enrico Maggi, who was succeeded by Vincenzo Galli (1754-1763). Enrico Maggi suffered an apopleptic attack and owing to his ill-health had to give up teaching after a short time. In 1754, the Inquisitor in Malta, Monsignor Gregorio dei duchi di Salvati, brought with him to Malta his private medical attendant Vincenzo Galli who had been a pupil with Grima at Florence. During his stay in Malta, Galli lectured on Anatomy with great success. It was about this time that we hear of a Maltese surgeon abroad who was making a name for himself as an anatomist; Michel Angiolo Magri, one of the pupils of Henin, became a famous dissector in the Hospital of Santa Maria in Florence about 1740 and was appointed Master of Anatomy at the Hospital of Messina in 1748. He was particularly renowned for his angiological preparations in coloured wax which compared favourably with those of the famous Ruysch.

The years 1763 to 1797 marked great progress in the school of Anatomy in Malta. This School, which had been left abandoned at the time of Maggi, was reorganised and revived during this period by Michelangiolo Grima.

There is evidence that the Grand Masters during this period showed great interest in the School of Anatomy. A report to the Grand Master from the Commission of the Treasury in 1766 mentions a Swiss Military surgeon, Antnony Mayer, who made a present to the Order of '...19 well-made anatomical models in coloured wax and a model of the human body of the same material. These models will help the study of Anatomy during the hot months when dissection is not possible owing to the dangers ensuing on operating on the dead body in this climate and at that season.' Further evidence is shown by the first 'Constituzione per i nuovi studi dell'Universita' of 1771 with its provisions for the study of Medicine and Surgery. The sections on Anatomy require:

I. 'un discorso generale sul corpo umane, dovrà insegnarle ai giovani col tal chiarezza e precisione che ne imparino i veri principi e teorie.

II. Ogni Sabato poi ne mesi d'Inverno dovra condurre i suoi scolari allo spedale grande e far loro vedere publicamente le preparazione anatomiche con ragione egli e far ragionar da piu esperti de suoi allievi sopra di essi...'

Michelangiolo Grima was a pupil of Henin. He studied Anatomy at the Hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence under Antonio Cocchi and Angiolo Nannoni, two anatomists of repute. He was then sent to France, at the expense of the Order, to complete his anatomical studies. With his return to the Island, Grima was appointed Anatomist (besides Chief Surgeon) in 1763. For the next 10 years he worked with enthusiasm reorganising the School of Anatomy on the methods of Paris and Florence, and during the 34 years he served the Order as surgeon and anatomist he worked indefatigably for the reestablishment of the Medical School and of Anatomical teaching in Malta.

Grima, apart from lecturing in Anatomy, gave public demonstrations on the dead body and carried out postmortem examinations on those who died of obscure diseases. Before Maggi's death he received no salary, though he had already started lecturing; but by 1771 we find that he was receiving 60 scudi annually and by 1778 120 scudi (besides his monthly salary of 29 scudi).

Grima was rather unpopular with Grand Master Ximenes, who succeded Pinto in 1773, in fact, just a month after the accession of this Grand Master, Grima was replaced by a Dr. Lucano; only 6 days passed however before Grima was reinstated in the Chair of Anatomy.

Grima's chief publications of Anatomical interest were:—

1. Instituzioni d'Anatomia (Venezia 1781). This consists of a collection of his lectures given to the students at the Sacro Spedale of the Order. The book was in 2 parts; the first part was published in 1781 but the second part, which was finished in 1784 and called 'Trattato della Sarcologia, Angiologia e Neurologia', was never published and is kept in manuscript form at the Malta Public Library.

2. Sulla Sensibilità dei tendini (Paris 1760). This thesis was read in 1756 to the Academia degli Apatisti in Italian and translated into French. The thesis was directed against the teaching of Haller and includes personal experiences of Grima.

3. Due Relazioni medico anatomiche (Malta 1764). Grima describes in detail the postemortems done on the cadavers of 2 noble Florentine ladies.

The Practice of Dissection in Malta.

Dissection probably started at Bologna between 1266 and 1275. The first reference to a postmortem examination was in 1286 by Salimbene and the first full description in 1302 by Bartolomeo da Varignana. In the 13th century, by order of Frederick II, all surgical students in the schools of Naples and Sicily had to dissect a cadaver at least once every 5 years but in spite of this, Anatomy was still taught by the reading of Galenic scripts without actual dissection being carried out. Mondino of Bologna was the first to dissect in person in public in 1316. In the mid-14th century dissection was still very rare and we find that the great Vesalius gave only a limited number of lesson-demonstrations on the cadaver. In the 15th century dissections were being performed in Bologna and Padua but were still few and far between. They became somewhat more common in the 16th century. In the 17th and first half of the 18th century dissection was still carried out with difficulty and subjects for dissection were difficult to obtain. According to Fedeli, in none of the Italian hospitals, not even at Rome and at Santa Maria Nuova in Florence, where the study of Anatomy had flourished so much, was dissection done with ease and liberty. In England, it was only in 1746 that the first regular school of dissection was established by William Hunter in London and, even then, mate-

rial for dissection was difficult to come by.

In spite of all this, dissection of the human body in Malta started early in comparison to other great hospitals abroad. With the establishment of the School of Anatomy in 1674, dissection was not yet allowed and only theoretical courses in Anatomy were carried out. Dissection in Malta started in 1723, during the reign of Grand Master de Vilhena, who succeded Marc'Antonio Zondadari to the Magistero dell'Ordine. To facilitate dissection it was decided that the bodies of all the professed Knights, including the Knights of the Grand Cross, and of all those who died in Hospital were to be dissected by the Director of Anatomy.

Dissection of human bodies was carried out in the Anatomical theatre. The first anatomical theatre was built by Grand Master Fra Nicolas Cottoner adjoining the Sacra Infermeria at Valletta in 1676. In 1716, another theatre was built, probably on the same site. Up to 1720, the theatre was not used for actual dissection but was probably used as lecture hall. In 1794, the Prior of Catalonia, Bali Fra Nicolo Abri-Descallar instituted a foundation of 2500 scudi for the purpose of erecting an anatomical amphithetre near the Order's Cemetery and to provide all the necessary instruments for dissection (as well as a professor to give lessons in practical dissection). The site of this amphitheatre was practically similar to that of its predecessor. It is of interest to note that the present Department of Anatomy at the Evans Laboratories, situated near what is nowadays called the Knightshall (the Sacra Infermeria of the Order), is not very far away from the original anatomical theatre.

Before being dissected, bodies had to be left, by law, for 24 hours after death in the mortuary. Here straps were fastened to the hands and feet of the cadaver so that the slightest motion would set a bell ringing, in this way precautions were taken to prevent the dissection of someone who was in fact not yet really dead.

Adjoining the Anatomical theatre was the Cemetery, of which nothing remains today, as well as the Chapel of Bones, which today is in ruins but part of which still remain included in the boundary wall of the Evans Laboratories.

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* 19th December 1676 according to documents quoted by Dr. P. Cassar in an article in Scientia (July-September 1958).