

or former head of a trade union, and sometimes former high-ranking military officers.

From the foundation of the Senate the members have been 'eminent' people. Two hundred years ago, when the Netherlands and Belgium were still one country, the Southern Netherlands predominantly wanted members of the aristocracy in the Senate. There were fewer aristocrats in the north of the country, so they came to a compromise. Aristocrats were permitted to become members alongside men who 'had rendered services to the State, who by their birth or wealth belong to the most distinguished men in the country'. The king appointed the members of the Senate for life.

When Belgium became independent in 1830, initially little changed in the functioning of the Senate. Over the course of about a century, various changes were implemented. In 1848 it was decided that the members should be elected by the States Provincial. Just forty years later it was decided that the members' personal financial wealth was no longer important. The Senate was also open to citizens (men, that is) who held high office, such as professors. Women became eligible from 1917.

For all these years the core of political decision making in the Netherlands has remained in the House of Representatives, but the Senate can make or break the government, especially at moments when that government does not have a Senate majority. If the cabinet falls, there are new elections for the House of Representatives. The elections for the Senate are fully independent of this. They take place once every four years.

The elections of May 2015 will take place halfway through the term of Rutte's liberal social democratic cabinet. From time immemorial governments able to count on a clear majority in both chambers have had few worries about the result of Senate elections. This government lacks such a majority, so these provincial elections will directly, rather than indirectly, affect national politics.

JORIS VAN DE KERKHOF

Translated by Ana Asbury

Between Myth and Reality

Andreas Vesalius

The year 2014 saw the five hundredth anniversary of the birth, in Brussels, of Andreas Vesalius, the revolutionary anatomist and medical reformer. His work has had enormous repercussions, both on the development of medical science and on the way we look at the body. Vesalius defended the idea that medicine should be founded on the scientific knowledge of the healthy body.

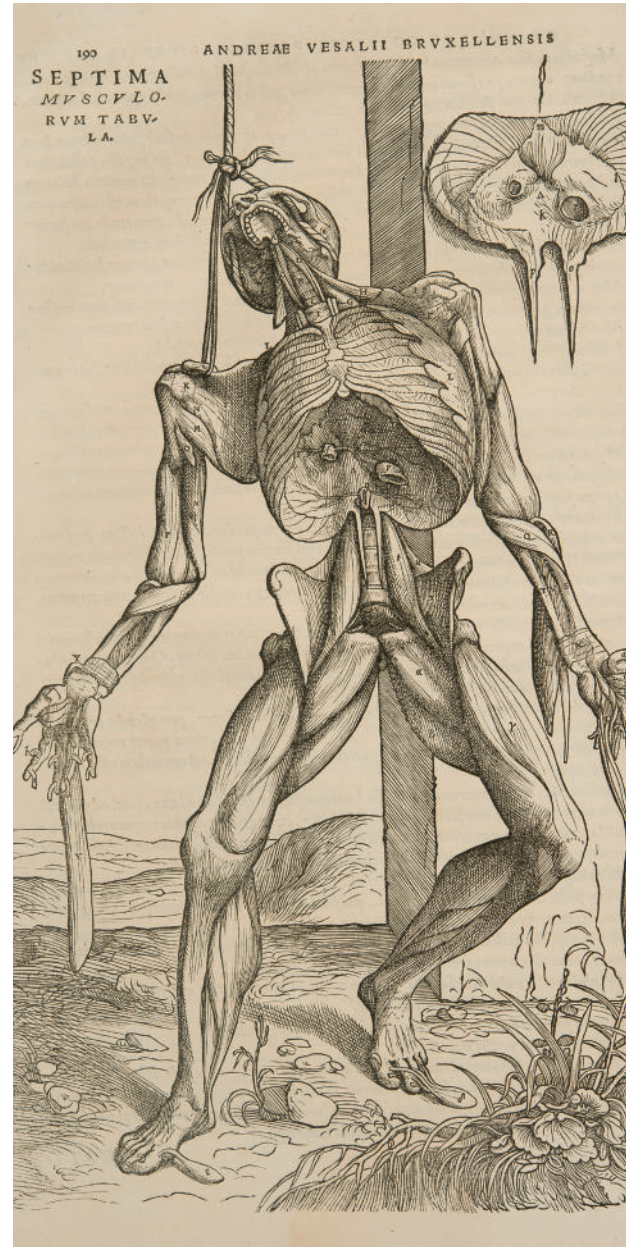
In his masterpiece, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), he was the first person in history to produce a description of the human body in minute detail. Not only was the text revolutionary, but the copious illustrations were also of exceptional artistic quality. For centuries Vesalius' 'muscle men' were the model for painters and sculptors. Above all they exemplified the positive manner in which the body was experienced and presented from the time of the Renaissance on.

In this respect the significance of Vesalius goes beyond his direct influence on the medical profession. Vesalius grew to be one of the central figures in early modern science who succeeded in distancing himself from his predecessors and prepared the way for critical and empirical research into nature. But this same veneration provided an appropriate breeding ground for countless myths. As early as the seventeenth century the tale was being spread that, as personal physician to the Spanish court, Vesalius had been condemned to death by the Inquisition, following the autopsy of a nobleman, whose heart, apparently, was still beating. It was only on the intervention of Philip II that Vesalius' punishment could be converted to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, a journey that eventually proved fatal for him. This myth, which is entirely without historical foundation, developed in the nineteenth century into a more generalised depiction in which Vesalius was the first to defy the ecclesiastical ban on anatomical dissection and so break the taboo on opening up the human body.

However, the reality was something else. Anatomical dissections had been a regular part of medical training in most European universities for centuries already. The religious ban on boiling bones (a practice associated with the transportation of the corpses of crusaders and with the concomitant dealing in relics) had no influence whatsoever on the practice of medical dissections. Vesalius never came into contact with the Inquisition. He adhered strictly to the rules and procedures that applied to dissections. Moreover the Inquisition was after heretics who were turning against the Church of Rome, and there was nothing in the practice of anatomy that in any way gave cause for that. There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that Vesalius had any heretical tendencies. Had that been the case, he would not have been able to continue so long at the court of Emperor Charles and Philip II. However it is historically correct that, as a student, Vesalius would steal corpses from churchyards and gallows sites at all hours of the night. But that was common, and even generally accepted, behaviour for students of medical science – as long as the corpses belonged to criminals or ‘reviled’ people, no one took the slightest bit of notice.

The myths that have arisen around the figure of Vesalius reflect a particular way of looking at the nature of science. In addition, revolutionary science stands against superstition, obscurantism and irrational traditions. To present Vesalius as a revolutionary pioneer of modern science it was (and still is) useful to present him as someone who came into contention with the religious dogmas and the short-sightedness of society in the times in which he lived. The scientific genius, unrecognised by his contemporaries, could only prevail thanks to his personal courage and perseverance. The myths about Vesalius merely demonstrate what many people still wish to hear, even though that is now out of date and erroneous.

A more discerning view on the figure of Vesalius allows one to see a researcher with exceptional talents, but also huge ambition, and someone marked by the ideas of his time. Vesalius was



Hanging Corpse in: Andreas Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem*, Basel, 1543
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not trying to weaken tradition, rather to restore it. As a new Galen he wanted to restore the work of the Greek anatomist to a place of honour, and to improve on it where necessary. Although his work was an important fresh step in the way in which scientific work was undertaken, Vesalius wanted above all to get back to the true knowledge that had existed among the Ancients. His anatomical work fully fitted into the paradigm of the new Galenism that was widespread during the Renaissance. Vesalius met with hardly any resistance.

What really made Vesalius a public icon was the way in which he made the connection between scientific culture and the sensitivities that were coming to be seen in the new ordering of society. More clearly than any other work, the *Fabrica* shows the reborn confidence of Western man, the belief in a better, utopian world. With the *Fabrica* Vesalius set scientific research in a much wider social context, a thought that may provide inspiration again to scientists of the 21st century.

GEERT VANPAEMEL

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

Society

The Gang of Nivelles

Thirty Years on

Thirty years have passed since Belgium was the scene of a series of attacks and cold-blooded murders, mainly carried out at supermarkets. The assailants have never been found. The violent raids took place at branches of the Colruyt chain and (especially) Delhaize supermarkets in 1982, 1983 and 1985, and led to the deaths of 28 people. They culminated in an attack at a Delhaize store in Aalst, in the province of East Flanders, on Saturday, 9 November 1985, in which eight people died. The amount of money stolen in the raids was minimal and certainly out of all proportion to the level of violence used. The case was in danger of expiring, but when the new Belgian government took office it immediately announced that it wished to extend the statute of limitations by ten years.

The impact of the crimes on people's daily lives was enormous, especially in 1985, when a total of 16 people died in attacks in Braine l'Alleud (province of Walloon Brabant), Overijse (Flemish Brabant) and Aalst. All of these attacks took place in Delhaize stores. Following the events in Aalst, the government decided to station armed soldiers in Delhaize stores. According to eyewitnesses, the gang consisted of a tall man ('the Giant'), 'the Killer' (who killed most of the victims) and 'the Old Man', who was usually the driver. There were sometimes several more assailants.

The attacks by the gang coincided with those by the extreme left-wing terrorist group CCC (Cellules Communistes Combattantes). Their attacks cost two people their lives, but the gang members were arrested and sentenced. However, the Gang of Nivelles, named after the Walloon Brabant town that was attacked first, was a puzzle for police. One thing that was clear was that most of the attacks were committed close to motorways, enabling the perpetrators to escape easily out of the country. Some witnesses claim that 'the Killer' died in the final attack in Aalst