

# Moral justification of anatomical dissection and conquest in the Spanish Chronicles of the Indies

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**Three cases of dissections of dead bodies are included in the Spanish Chronicles of the Indies. By reporting on these advanced medico-scientific practices, the chroniclers appear to be confirming the superiority of the conquistadors over the natives and justifying the conquest. However, they problematize this supposed superiority by framing the events in complex scenarios that resound of some of the controversies surrounding dissection in the period. This contradictory treatment of dissection can be interpreted as a manifestation of the conquistadors' anxiety around being physically identical to the natives except for a fragile, skin-deep veneer of civilized behaviour.**

## The ethicality of anatomical dissection and the questioning of the conquistadors' superiority in the Spanish Chronicles of the Indies

The first known reports of anatomical dissection in the Americas are not scientific descriptions in medical books but three short narrative passages in the Chronicles of the Indies.<sup>1,2</sup> The Chronicles are reports of the Spanish conquest and colonization written in the sixteenth century by those who participated in the events or had access to witnesses. They are one-sided accounts of military operations as well as of the daily life in the newly founded colonies, most of them from the pen of clerics or officers of the crown. Not surprisingly, they presented the events in ways that contributed to legitimize the conquest and colonization.<sup>3–5</sup> While the report of the conquistadors bringing such complex medical procedure to uncivilized lands seems to confirm their superiority, the ethical issues that surround the actual performance of the dissections challenge it. In their narration the chroniclers implicitly elicit problems attached to ethical issues such as the consent of the donor, the convenience for lay people to attend such a gruesome performance, and the role of the dissected body as surrogate sacrificial figure. We argue that this portrayal of the dissections in ways that simultaneously support and undermine the superiority of the conquistadors has to be understood within the broader

anxieties that characterize colonial enterprises in the period. As Earle<sup>6</sup> eloquently put it,

[f]ar from being an enterprise based on an unquestioning assumption of European superiority, early modern colonialism was an anxious pursuit. This anxiety is captured most profoundly in the fear that living in an unfamiliar environment, and among unfamiliar peoples, might alter not only the customs but also the very bodies of settlers. Perhaps, as Columbus suspected, unmediated contact with these new lands would weaken settlers' constitutions to such an extent that they died. Or perhaps it might instead transform the European body in less destructive but equally unwelcome ways, so that it ultimately ceased to be a European body at all. (3)

Indeed behind the three texts analyzed lurks the conquistadors' fears of identity, of being not that different from the conquered Other, even of becoming the Other in an environment that is new and hostile to the point of affecting their body. This idea is common currency in post-colonial studies and it is associated to Edward Said, Homi Bhaba, and Ann Laura Stoler, to mention some of the best-known critics. Specific triggers of this anxiety can be analyzed, such as the Spanish conquistadors' fear that the change of diet they had to undergo in the new land might affect their body and identity.<sup>6</sup> Also, fear of the 'reverse colonization' of bodies can be studied through its manifestations. For instance, Arata<sup>7</sup> reads vampire and gothic novels as symptoms of imperial anxieties in Victorian England. Our study deals also with symptoms of this anxiety in the form of the contradictory depiction of the first dissections of the Americas in the Chronicles. The problem at their centre is a power-knowledge weapon of civilization – dissection – backfiring when used in the unfamiliar environment of the new world. Such an unexpected response entails the reactivation of some ethical objections surrounding dissection that in Europe were considered settled. In the new scenarios of the conquest of the Americas, ethical considerations regarding the respect due to dead bodies, personal identity and its

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connection to the body, and the misappropriation of bodies for dissection take very different, problematic meanings.

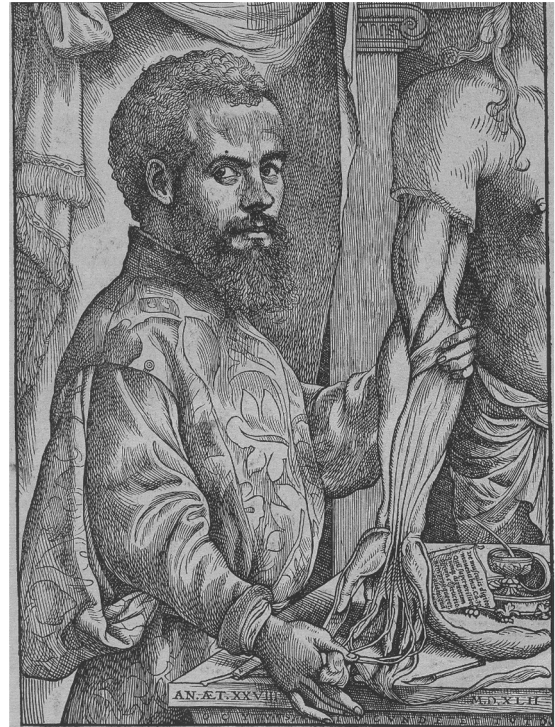
We recognize that our cases are very limited in number for a true case study. However the three cases are very meaningful not only for being so chronologically and geographically close to the conquest, but also for being taken from documents that were written precisely to justify the conquest by documenting the conquerors' supposed superiority. A much more nuanced and interesting picture could be presented if the whole history of dissection in colonial Latin America were to be studied under this light.<sup>a</sup> As an advance of this much longer study that is still to be done, I include the analysis of the testimony of a handwritten note added by an eighteenth century priest to a printed copy of a book on the wonders of colonial Mexico, written by the physician and naturalist Hernández de Toledo<sup>8</sup> after the first scientific expedition to the Americas in the mid-sixteenth century.

### The debate on the morality of dissection in early modern Spain

The development of dissection in early modern Europe is well studied and documented. In the fifteenth century, the teaching of anatomy, which had been considered unnecessary for the education of doctors in previous centuries, began to be practiced in some universities in northern Italy, and slowly spread to other countries during the sixteenth century. Anatomy gradually passed from being taught in lectures based on the Galenic textbooks to being directly demonstrated to the students on dead bodies dissected for the purpose. A milestone in the implantation of the new method was the publication of Vesalius<sup>9</sup> fully illustrated *De humani corporis fabrica* in 1543 (Figure 1). The book contained numerous high-quality illustrations taken from the many dissections that Vesalius<sup>9</sup> had done in the preceding years. He not only dissected corpses; he invited his students to take part in the dissection because he believed that this practice was fundamental for the education of competent physicians (Ref. [10, p. 40–42]). In Spain, anatomical dissection was popular even before the publication of Vesalius<sup>9</sup> book. As early as 1501, the University of Valencia created a permanent position for the teaching of anatomy, soon to be followed by the universities of Alcalá, Salamanca, Valladolid, Barcelona, and others (Refs. [11;12, p. 205, 218;13, p. 90]). Vesalius<sup>9</sup> lived and worked as a physician of the Emperor Charles V, to whom he dedicated his *De humani corporis fabrica*. His presence no doubt contributed to the popularity of dissection in Spain.<sup>b</sup> By the second third of the sixteenth century, most Spanish medical universities were teaching anatomy according to modern methods based on dissection. Anatomical books, such as the

<sup>a</sup> Although much has been written about medicine and its practice in the early Americas, there is not a comprehensive study dealing with dissection. A critical review of the main areas of study in the field of medicine in the early Americas is Newson.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>b</sup> The story that Vesalius had problems with the Spanish Inquisition is a legend of later origins. According to this spurious story, Vesalius was practicing a dissection on the corpse of a noblewoman who comes back to life; a scandal ensued and Vesalius had to leave the country in a hurry to avoid the Inquisition's order to interrogate him. The story also says that the matter was eventually settled by making Vesalius go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to atone for his desecration of bodies. This legend is far from the reality: Vesalius was held in great esteem by Charles V's son, Philip II, who rewarded him with a pension for life and made him a count palatine (Ref. [47, p. 304]).



**Figure 1.** Engraving with the portrait of Andreas Vesalius<sup>9</sup> showing the muscles and tendons of a dissected arm. From the first edition of his *De humani corporis fabrica*, Basilea, J. Oporinus, 1543.

By permission of the History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine of the National Institutes of Health.

Spaniard Valverde's<sup>14</sup> profusely illustrated *Historia de la composición del cuerpo humano* (1565) circulated widely. Spaces for the exploration and teaching of anatomy, the so-called anatomical theatres, were instituted. The University of Salamanca built a permanent anatomical theatre in 1552 in which the professors opened bodies in front of the students, and a lay audience was often allowed to attend (Ref. [15, p. 484, 16]).

The moral legitimacy of the dismemberment of dead bodies for anatomical research and teaching was in need of formal examination. In 1551, Charles V commissioned an inquiry in Salamanca to investigate if anatomy, as practiced by Vesalius,<sup>9</sup> was in accordance with the religious and moral norms of the period. The positive judgement of the board deemed this new practice appropriate and commendable (Prieto Carrasco 30). Salamanca's ruling was in line with the approval of dissection that the Catholic Church had issued previously. The practice had been implicitly sanctioned by the fact that Pope Sixtus IV (1414–1484) had actually practiced dissection during his studies in Bologna. Another implicit support of dissection was the widespread circulation of religious relics, which can be seen as a form of body dismemberment endorsed by the church since antiquity.<sup>17</sup> Some relics were the remains of martyrs who had been dismembered in their martyrdom, but often they were body parts that had been cut out from the corpses of saintly people by Christian believers. In any case, the church's approval of dissection was made explicit in 1523, when pope Clement VII published an edict

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