

# Girolamo Fabrici

Girolamo Fabrici, known as Hieronymus Fabricius in Latin, was given the surname Aquapendente from the city where he was born, near Orvieto, Italy. Born in 1533, Fabrici was the eldest son of a respected noble family, whose coat of arms appears as an illustration in the title page of Fabrici's book on embryology, *De formato foetu*. Little is known of Fabrici's parents. His father is recorded as Fabricio, and Fabrici is said to have been named for his paternal grandfather. Fabrici influenced many scientists and physicians of his time to consider embryology as a legitimate and independent subject, and his two illustrated treatises on embryology are a remarkable legacy of his investigations on the development and comparative anatomy of fetuses.

In 1550 Fabrici's family sent him to the University of Padua where he studied Greek, Latin, philosophy, and logic under the patronage of the Venetian family Lippomano. His success in his lessons led the family to continue to support him while he ventured into studies of medicine. In 1559 Fabrici obtained his doctorate in medicine and philosophy from the University of Padua, and he continued to study under the famous professor of anatomy Gabriele Fallopio until Fallopio's death in 1562. The following year, Fabrici began to conduct private lessons in anatomy until he was appointed the chair of surgery by the Venetian Senate on 10 April 1565. His first public course in anatomy was taught from 18 December to 5 January 1566. William Harvey, who later became known for his studies in anatomy and embryology, was one of Fabrici's notable pupils.

Fabrici's fame and salary continued to grow with his success and his reappointment as the chair of anatomy within the University. He was admitted to the College of Philosophy and Medicine 12 May 1584, when he resigned his position as the chair of surgery in favor of Julius Casserius. By 1589 however, Fabrici was reappointed to the chair for the fourth time. In 1594 Fabrici influenced the construction of and later inaugurated the university's first permanent anatomical theater, which is still preserved and bears Fabrici's name. There he gave lectures and performed many anatomical demonstrations, dissecting the uterus and placenta of a pregnant woman in 1586. He began lectures on the formation of the fetus in 1589 and provided private lessons on the subject of embryology in 1592. Fabrici was given life tenure in 1600 and awarded *Supraordinarius* of anatomy, and by 1603 he ascended to the title of Professor *Supraordinarius* in surgery. In 1609 the chair of anatomy and surgery were separated by formal decree, and Fabrici retained only the title of *Supraordinarius* of anatomy. In addition to his academic popularity, Fabrici was often called upon for his medical services. He was consulted by persons such as the Duke of Urbino and Galileo, and he was made a knight of St. Mark by the Republic of Venice in 1607 for treating the wounds of the Italian patriot and church reformer Paolo Sarpi.

In an attempt to leave a legacy of scientific research, Fabrici undertook the project of publishing many of his investigations. Realizing that the works of Andreas Vesalius, Aristotle, and Galen were lacking in their accuracy, Fabrici hoped to introduce some of his own discoveries. Fabrici published his surgical works in the *Pentateuchos cheirurgicum*, printed in Frankfurt am Main in 1592, and in the *Operationes chirurgicae* which was published in Venice in 1619 and has since been printed in over twenty languages. In addition to over nine publications on anatomy, Fabrici published two important works in embryology. *De formato foetu* (The Formed Fetus) was published in 1600 by Franciscus Bolzetta and in 1604 by Laurentius Pasquatus. The second embryological treatise, *De formatione ovi et pulli* (On the Formation of the Egg and of the Chick), was published posthumously in 1621. Both contained impressive illustrations depicting the uterus and comparative studies of the fetuses in dogs, cats, mice, rabbits, goats, guinea pigs, sheep, cows, horses, pigs, birds, sharks, and humans. Although his works in anatomy reflect some incorrect assumptions of the time, Fabrici is considered to be the first to study and illustrate the decidua of the human uterus.

After serving the University of Padua for nearly fifty years and accruing an impressive professional reputation, Fabrici retired from teaching in November of 1613. He continued publishing his research, although he suffered a number of illnesses throughout the coming years. Fabrici married a woman named Violante Vidal and although they never bore any children of their own, they adopted Fabrici's grand-niece, Semidea. Prior to his marriage to Violante, Fabrici had fathered an illegitimate son, Francesco, with whom he did not have a good relationship. His wife passed away in 1618, and soon after his adopted niece Semidea was married, Fabrici died at his estate in Venice 21 May 1619. He was buried next to his wife on 23 May 1619 in Padua at the west cloister of the church of Sanfresco. After Semidea died 4 January 1620, Fabrici's remaining heirs left his tomb unnamed and never erected the altar he had requested in his last will.

Fabrici is known for his fame as a surgeon and for his two illustrative treatises on embryology. His career as an anatomist and professor left him a legacy of impressive academic achievement, and his works in comparative embryology remain a historical artifact of his investigations in human development.

## Sources

1. Adelman, Howard Bernhardt. *The Embryological Treatises of Hieronymus Fabricius of Aquapendente*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1942.
2. Allen, Garland E. "Fabrici, Girolamo." *Dictionary of Scientific Biography* 4: 507-11.