

Thomas Bartholin

THE ANATOMY HOUSE IN COPENHAGEN

Edited by Niels W. Bruun. English translation by Peter Fisher.

Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press/University of Copenhagen, 2015., 222 pp; Preface; Introduction (Morten Fink-Jensen); An Account of the Text; Index of Persons; Commentary; Literature cited in the Commentary; The State of the Anatomy House 12 April 1676; Inventory of the Anatomy House 1676; Index of Illustrations; Bibliography; Index of Subjects

When it comes to books, the form is always very important: not only „the cover page sells the book,“ but the choice of the format, font, and illustrations,

often influence the perception of a book so much that it can determine its final reception. In the case of the works dealing with historical topics, this applies even more: if successful, the book „bouquet“ enables the reader to transform into a connoisseur and to be teleported efficiently into the past. Thomas Bartholin's *Anatomy House*, as edited by Niels Bruun and the Museum Tusulanum Press, has fully succeeded in this mission.

To understand the importance of the opening of the Copenhagen Anatomy House in the mid of the 17th century, one



has to remember that this occurred less than two centuries after lifting the general ban over the human body dissection. In most of European cities, medicine students still had to search for bodies at places of public executions, and the first anatomical theatres had to have wooden fences high enough to prevent the fainting observers from causing the domino effect. The author of the meticulous description of the Copenhagen Anatomy House is Thomas Bartholin (1616-1680), physician, mathematician, and theologian, an offspring of a family that delivered a series of university professors (his son, Caspar Bartholin Jr., was the first to describe the “Bartholin’s glands”). Even if the subject of Thomas Bartholin’s book is so specific and apparently delimited, actually, *The Anatomy House* is a much broader story on the courage needed for the realisation of new initiatives in general. In the early-17th-century Denmark, namely, dissections had sporadically been understood as important for medical education, but the students of University of Copenhagen at first still used to attend anatomy classes, and even graduate elsewhere – in Basel, Padua, or Leiden (like Thomas Bartholin himself). And when finally one professor had wanted to introduce an autopsy in Copenhagen, performing it in his own apartment, the reaction of the citizens was so fierce that the professor had to give up the idea. The things changed in 1645, when the German Simon Paulli opened the „Domus anatomica“ with a theatre for public dissections, a revolving table, and even the king’s box, from where special guests could have observed the autopsy. It was however Paulli’s successor, Thomas Bartholin, who secured the real glory for the Domus after 1648. Bartholin’s major discovery – of the lymphatic system – was claimed also by the Swedish anatomist Rudbeck, but Bartholin earned the life-long position of the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and other honours. Curiously, in his later life he performed autopsies of the rulers’ pets, like Galen, the authority Bartholin believed to have partly disproved.

Text editions, especially when supported by commentaries (in fact, serious studies) and illustrations (in the case of *The Anatomy House*, almost 50 high-quality reproductions), may be considered supremely humane pieces of art: the editors of such editions themselves master the matter, and they still are ready to share the original with the public, exposing their translation and/or interpretation to the immediate insight and critique. Therefore, one can only express enormous gratitude to Niels Bruun and assure the author that his hope, the book would be a valuable resource for historians of medicine, will be fulfilled indeed.

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