

# **In Search of Andreas Vesalius**

## The Quest for the Lost Grave



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## The Quest for the Lost Grave

**Theo Dirix**

Translated from Dutch into English by Friends of Vesalius

With three occasional poems:

1902, Edith Wharton: 'Vesalius in Zante (1564)'  
1964, Crysanthi Zitsaia: 'To the great Belgian anatomist Andreas Vesalius'  
2014, Bryan W. Green: 'Vesalius'

*For Omer Steeno, Maurits Biesbrouck and Theodoor Goddeeris,  
the éminences grises of Vesalius research in Belgium.*

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In contrast to the black-and-white original  
of the *Fabrica*'s actual title page,  
this oversized reproduction of the scene of public dissection  
came to life on canvas with the vivid colours used by the artist.  
Although the painting at first appeared complete,  
Eli realised that its central figure was missing.  
Vesalius had yet to be painted,  
the entire piece suspended in time  
with a captive audience awaiting the anatomist's arrival.

from *Public Anatomy* by A. Scott Pearson,  
Ocean View Publishing, Longboat Key, Florida, 2011, pp.164







Illus. 1: Title page of the Fabrica of Vesalius.



# 1. Digging in the past for a future

On a quiet summer's day in 2013 an email dropped into my inbox at the embassy: 'There are excavations underway on the corner of Kolokotroni Street and Kolyva Street. I've no idea why they are digging there. All I know is that a piece of the old square has been found. The square was situated between the church and the monastery. Did you know about this?'

My search for the lost tomb of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century anatomist of Brabant, Andreas Vesalius, had often taken me to this part of Zakynthos. In fact, barely two months before receiving this email I had organised a reconnaissance mission to this very corner of the popular Ionian island.

This mission had been agreed in April with the urban and archaeological services and included the participation of Jan Driessen, professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain and Director of the EBSA (École Belge d'Athènes/Belgische School te Athene) and Dr. Apostolos Sarris, Deputy Director of the Institute for Mediterranean Studies – Foundation for Research and Technology, Hellas (IMS- FORTH).

The high expectations of these guests were unfortunately not fulfilled by this visit. I'm afraid I had been a little too enthusiastic in my praise of the island, for the three hours that they were my captive audience during the car ride from Athens to the ferry port of Kyllini.

The Santa Maria delle Grazie Church, for example, where Greek blogger and outstanding historian Pavlos Plessas believes the tomb of Vesalius to have been, was completely gone and nothing but asphalt and houses fill the place where it used to be.

An earthquake in August 1953 had destroyed the entire island and the Saint Nicholas Church, on the central Solomos Square was the only church, from the age of Vesalius, to survive. The Saint Dionysios Church, which was built in a later period, also remained. The rest of the city (including the church of Santa Maria) had been, once again, destroyed. I write 'once again', for in previous times, December 1820 and January 1893, to be precise, the tectonic plates under the island had scraped against each other with the same destructive force and disastrous results. Eternity only lasts sixty years on Zakynthos, wrote the Dutch poet Mark Boog in 2012.

After intensive investigations in the neighbourhood, with old and new maps in hand, Pavlos Plessas is now convinced that the former Catholic church is indeed to be

found at this very location. On approaching from the sea, Kolokotroni Street is seen to widen, unexpectedly, just before the crossroad with Kolyva Street, which runs parallel to the coast, and to narrow again immediately after the intersection. It is at this junction on the left-hand side that the works have been going on. A few years ago, during the construction of the second house on the right-hand side, some marble slabs were found and preserved.

They would definitely appear to be part of funerary monuments from inside, or beside, the church. Plessas has himself seen and photographed these marble slabs. Alongside this high building there are two wooden cottages, which date back to just after the great earthquake of 1953.

Next to the works is a free parking place. It is owned by the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, and is, provisionally, rented as a car park by the four-star Hotel Palatino, which is just across the street. There is a garden behind the car park, just around the corner.

In this area, the archaeologists saw little possibility to explore under ground. The chances to excavate at this location are small, except perhaps in the gardens or if ever the wooden houses were to be demolished. Opportunities would have also arisen of course, in the parking lot, if and when the Chamber of Commerce and Industry would build their offices.

None of us could have imagined, therefore, that only a few weeks later, at the same location and totally unexpectedly, a fairly recent house was knocked down. Furthermore, it was unthinkable that the excavation works that were carried out after this were in fact the four-feet-deep foundations for a new building.

Having twice reread Pavlos Plessas's email, which he had sent from his second home in London, I decided to call the vice-mayor of Zakynthos, Akis Ladikos.

He is the Vice-Mayor of Culture, Sports and Youth Affairs and is also passionate about archeology. I could not get through to him, as he was at a meeting, but moments later I had his employee, Dimitris, on the line and he translated into English the following answers from Ladikos:

'The archaeological department has, indeed, been doing some digging, but has not found anything more than a few rocks, discovered four metres deep. These were probably part of the defence wall, and not from the church itself.'

By making light of their activities and discoveries, he unintentionally fueled my frustration.

I didn't feel at all comfortable about this call. I overcame my reluctance and determined to phone David Lomastro, who is a colleague of mine at the embassy. As luck would



have it, he had chosen to spend his month's holiday on Zakynthos, with his family and friends, who had flown by charter plane directly from Belgium, and was, at the very moment of my call, about to take a walk into the town. On hearing my story, he was happy to make a slight detour and to take a few photographs of the site. Half an hour later I was able to load snapshots of bulldozers and concrete mixers onto the screen in my office.

My colleague, known for his ironic sense of humour, commented, 'I thought archaeologists always worked with a brush and tweezers!'

It wasn't apparent from the photos that the archaeological services had been involved, but it was very obvious that major earthworks were underway here, and that a crater had been filled with concrete in preparation for a new construction.

Along with a brief request for more information, I sent the photos to the Director of the Department of Byzantine Archaeology in Patras, Anita Koumoussi. Her office is in the port city in the Peloponnese, just across from the island. As the leading post on Zakynthos is not filled at present, she has, quite recently, been made responsible for the island. In preparation for our April mission I had tried for months, unsuccessfully I'm afraid, to make an appointment with her. She had informed me, by mail, that she had never been to Zakynthos and that she hadn't heard of Vesalius before I mentioned him. She had, however, pledged me all the support available from her colleagues in the Byzantine Museum at Solomos Square.

Meanwhile, my correspondent Pavlos Plessas, and his informant on the island, told me that the answer to their questions about the nature of the works had been given very clearly: there were no archaeological excavations taking place at this location.

The reaction of the archaeological department came a few days later. Mrs Koumoussi had especially travelled to Zakynthos and had personally supervised the excavation work. This is what she wrote to me: 'At first glance, I am sure that what was found, at a depth of two metres, is part of a weak wall, built at a late stage, probably 19<sup>th</sup> century. If a relic of Santa Maria delle Grazie is to be found it will certainly be a lot deeper and of a different building structure, but we keep on hoping.'

The following days were very busy with mails passing back and forth, but Pavlos Plessas remained doubtful about the information we received.

'If she says two metres deep, which Santa Maria is she referring to? The 16th century one, or the 1953 one? The 1953 one was higher than the street level of today. Was the floor of the church removed and raised each time the church was rebuilt? And what is two metres deep? The bottom of the wall or the top? Or was there only one layer remaining? I am sure this is not the wall of the church – it is located too

much to the south. Perhaps it is part of the outer wall, but only if the brickwork is close to Kolokotroni Street. Walls from the 16th century served as reinforcements and therefore were thick, but that of course depended upon the materials available. No news of the director or deputy mayor? The excavation works must have been completed then?’

The excavation works were indeed soon ended, the foundations poured and the hole filled in.

Six months later I was back at this site, this time to view the concrete skeleton of a four-storey building! From the corner of the intersection, the new structure even encroached on part of the car park of the hotel. As with any new construction, a building permission, several authorizations and a control visit of the site from the Archaeological Department must have been applied for, months and months ahead. How strange that nobody has mentioned this during our visit.

In some areas in Greece you have only to stick a shovel into the ground to stumble upon history. For construction in areas where archaeological remains are considered probable, a permit must be received before work can commence. If old stones are stumbled upon, the owner must inform the archaeological department immediately in order for an emergency investigation to take place. The owner is obliged, by law, to co-operate fully in the protection of both the site and anything found on it. Depending on the importance of the find, building works may be temporarily or permanently shut down.

This law has given rise to an ambiguous attitude towards archaeology. Greeks are so spoiled, from the historical point of view, that old stones are often considered to be a nuisance.

The media interest in our search for the grave of Vesalius meant that the procedure regarding this construction was followed very carefully indeed. Instead of calling out a technician from the local archaeological department, the director came personally from Patras. During our exploratory mission, everybody had heard us talk about the fact that the church was located on the other side of the crossroad, thus the excavation works were completed with confidence.

The search for the lost tomb of Andreas Vesalius, who was buried half a millennium ago, would not be completed on that summer's day in 2013. The area, that only sixty years earlier had suffered another devastating earthquake, the aftermath of which resulted in the stone waste of an entire neighbourhood – houses, church, cemetery and monastery – being bulldozed into the sea, did not give up its secrets yet.

Very recently, however, by way of titillation, a simply decorated, stone artefact from the church emerged, and was found by accident in front of the site on Kolokontroni Street, on the side nearest to the sea. Just to keep the fires going!

For the Embassy of Belgium in Athens, this story had in fact begun in March 2011. (An earlier approach from Pascale Pollier, the medical artist who started this quest for the grave of Vesalius, had been given a rather lukewarm reception by my predecessors at the Embassy.) My involvement started quite soon after my arrival in Greece, on being introduced to Steven Soetens in March, who was then the director of the Ecole Belge/Belgische School at Athens, the EBSA.

‘You might want to contact Pascale Pollier,’ he wrote to me after our first meeting. ‘It occurred to me on my way back to the school that we could perhaps combine a couple of things. There is the occasion of 500 years Vesal (as they call Vesalius here). Maybe a new monument could be made, perhaps in collaboration with the artist. With the presence of the Embassy on Zakynthos, perhaps we could help with the organization of an event, with an exhibition (I hear that plans are already being made). This is Pascale’s email address. It’s just an idea!’ He wrote prophetically.

Pascale Pollier immediately responded to my message of April 1 with a serious and enthusiastic message: ‘We would be delighted to collaborate with the Belgian School and the Embassy of Belgium. We are planning a major conference in 2014 (probably in Brussels) with the provisional title ‘Vesalius Continuum’.

This would be in collaboration with: the Association Européenne des Illustrateurs Medicaux et Scientifique (Association of Medical and Scientific Illustrators of Europe) (AEIMS), the Medical Artists’s Association of Great Britain (MAA) and The Vesalius Trust. We will keep you informed of our plans.’

I was infected, infected with the Vesalius Bug. Vesalius became a very regular feature in the newsletters that the Embassy sends to the Belgian community in Greece. For inspiration I corresponded with ever-increasing intensity with Pascale Pollier and Ann Van de Velde, both of the association of Biological and Medical Art in Belgium (BIOMAB). Electronic news letters are known to be peculiar and unpredictable and like a message in a bottle, they came the way of Professor Em. Dr. Omer Steeno. He is a specialist physician in internal medicine, an endocrinologist and an andrologist, Associate Professor and the emeritus Head of Clinic in Leuven. He has devoted his life to the study of Vesalius. With more than fifty publications on the anatomist, he is one of the most eminent Vesalius scholars in Belgium.

‘Ready for further collaboration,’ he generously offered his assistance. I’ve since abused his kind offer to such an extent that I gained not just one, but three new

friends. Many articles on Vesalius are a collaboration between Maurice Biesbrouck, MD and clinical biologist from Roeselare, Theodoor Goddeeris, a medical doctor from Kortrijk, and Omer Steeno, from Leuven. Without this infernal trio, this book would not exist. When I playfully questioned if this nickname bothered them at all, my namesake responded, 'We are like the three-headed Cerberus, watching over everything said about Vesalius.'

Pascale Pollier and her fellow enthusiasts were delighted with the suggestion that the conference be held on Zakynthos rather than in Brussels.

On August 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011, with a copy sent to Omer Steeno, came a request from the UK. Mark Richard Gardiner, retired British professor of paediatrics, on behalf of The Hellenic Medical Society of the United Kingdom, expressed his desire to be involved in the Vesalius project. In October 2011, I sent the request on to Pascale Pollier, who had settled back into London, and had sadly lost her address book and correspondents lists. Gardiner, fortunately, has since opened his address book for the Vesalius Continuum Conference on Zakynthos and has shared with us his list of contacts. On this list are some of the most prestigious names in the academic world.

Thus a great team of collaborators has slowly accumulated and together we have worked on plans for an international conference on science and art, an exhibition, a new memorial monument to Vesalius, and a series of concerts in the Ionian Islands. The quest for the lost grave of the anatomist is what brought us together. By offering patronage for the festivities, the Belgian Embassy in Athens, with the blessing of the City of Zakynthos, is continuing a tradition created by previous diplomats, who saw in Vesalius a bridge between Belgium and Greece, between past and present.

The grand occasion to bring all these activities together: the 500<sup>th</sup> celebration of Vesalius's birth in Brussels and the 450<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death in Zakynthos in 2014/2015.



## 2. Andreas Vesalius Bruxellensis

On December 31, 1514, Isabel Crabbe gave birth to a son in Brussels, the second of three boys, (she had three sons and a daughter), who was named after his father, Andries van Wesele.

A pharmacist by profession, Andries the elder worked in the service of the Habsburger from Ghent, for him with the protruding chin: Charles, Landlord of the Netherlands, later to become the Roman Emperor, Charles the Fifth. The grandfather of the young Andries, named Everaert, and his great-grandfather, Johannes, or Jan van Wesele, were doctors at the court of Mary of Burgundy, Queen of the Netherlands, who still ruled our region. Great-grandfather Johannes was also dean of the medical faculty of the University of Leuven and later chief physician of the City of Brussels.

I have since learned from Omer Steeno, that in the wedding hall of Brussels, our capital city, there is a wooden statue of great-grandfather Johannes.

The property owned by Johannes, and later his son Everaert, lay on the edge of the Meerdaalwoud, in the area now called Oud-Heverlee, between the lakes of the domain known today as Zoete Waters (Sweet Waters). Now a restaurant, called Spaans Dak (Spanish Roof), a plaque hangs on the wall recording that here was the family domain called Heerlijkheid Steenberghe, the cradle of Andries.

It was a wintery day when Omer Steeno showed me a photo posted on the Internet, in which he and Maurice Biesbrouck pose, with great pride, in front of the plaque.

According to my sources, grandfather Everaert van Wesele died unmarried, with three 'bastard children', who could not, therefore, inherit the property. The property, 'De Heerlijkheid' went instead to his sister and three brothers.

The lunch that Steeno and I enjoyed at the Spaans Dak restaurant was excellent and marked the beginning of our tradition of sharing a table and talking endlessly about Vesalius.

He told me that Oud-Heverlee had slowly built up a close relationship with Zakynthos in the second half of the nineties. After an intense correspondence in April 1998 a first visit took place.

Steenno led a delegation of four to the Greek island. He was accompanied by Constant Boghe (tourism), Rachael Clabots (culture) and Albert Vanhamel (member of the city council). Their translator was Vivi Labordus-Papachristou. They were received by Fotis Ladikos, who was the mayor at the time. On looking at the pictures of the trip, delegation on an outing, delegation at the table, delegation gets present,

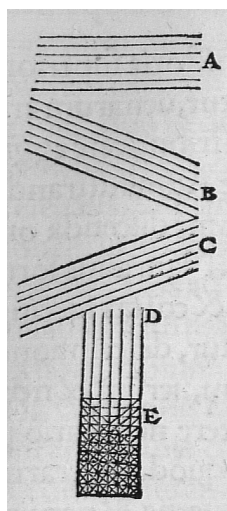
the striking features of Fotis Ladikos show that he is undeniably the father of Akis Ladikos, the current Deputy Mayor of Culture.

Various practical objections stood in the way of the dream of twinning the towns – or was the interest too one-sided?

The twinning between Zakynthos and Oud-Heverlee may have got off to a bad start; however we succeeded, in early 2014, in creating a school exchange between the 1<sup>st</sup> Lyceum of Zakynthos and The Sacred Heart Institute in Heverlee. The two-year programme, with visits back and forth, was funded by the European Comenius Fund. It was our intention to enable young people from both countries to step in the footsteps of a European *avant la lettre*. We have always believed that the inspiration of a revolutionary and innovative researcher/teacher from the past can guarantee a great enhancement of the future. The idea to involve students was first suggested to us by Gardiner. He was perhaps thinking along the lines of focusing on medical studies, and Pascale Pollier too would love to involve future medical artists in the project. It can never begin too early, I suggested to the contrary, and after this exchange, students from both secondary schools might perhaps choose to study medicine, or the history of science, or art and science. (Alternatively, as I reflected playfully to their parents during an information session at Heverlee, they might, rather more disturbingly, go for consular or diplomatic sciences.)

The van Weseles were the descendants of a merchant family from the German city of Wesel, on the Rhine. On the red diamond of the city's coat of arms there are three weasels around a silver shield. On the Vesalius coat of arms the weasels are placed below each other. This coat of arms adorns the frontispiece on the title page of his most famous book: *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem*, (*On the fabric of the human body in seven books*). Thanks to Chantal Pollier, sculptor and designer of the plinth of a new memorial statue created by her sister Pascale and Richard Neave, it also appears in Zakynthos.

Five hundred years ago, the street in Brussels where Andries van Wesele was born was called Hellestraatken. Today it is named Joseph Dupont Street and is near the European Synagogue in Regentschapslaan. It links the Robert Catteau Lyceum in Ernest Allard Street with Wol Street, which becomes Karmelietenstraat.



Illus. 2:  
Pattern of  
the fibers in  
a vein wall,  
details in  
plate 190 of  
the *Fabrica*  
of Vesalius.

This is also my adopted neighbourhood: the Karmelietenstraat is the location of the headquarters of my employer, the Federal Public Service of Foreign Affairs. And on a blue Monday, between two foreign postings, my children went to school in the Robert Catteau Lyceum. In those days I regularly passed by the plaque on the wall of the school in Miniemen Street. The people of the City of Brussels mounted the plaque there on the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of their famous fellow townsman, in October 1964. As befits a school that teaches the Classics, the plaque is written in Latin and reads:

*‘Dignummemoria in hac area Seculo XV surgebat domus perclebris avctoris andreae Vesalii bruxellensis 1515–1564 qui anno 1542 suum humani corporis fabrica celeberrimum Librum the feliciter posteris typis mandavit.’*

Here was the birthplace of Andreas Vesalius of Brussels 1514–1564 who became world famous in 1542 for his celebrated book about the construction of the human body.

But shouldn't that be 1543? I thought to myself, even then!

Andries van Wesele spent several years of his childhood in Brussels. After primary school, he left Brussels to begin his secondary studies in Leuven.

He, who was born in Brussels and named Andries van Wesele and who died known as Ανδρέα Βεζάλ (Andre Vesal or Bezal) on Zakynthos, would become Andreas Vesalius Bruxellensis in Leuven. There the foundations of his future life were laid, as was 'predicted' by Girolamo Cardano, a successful 16<sup>th</sup>-century astrologer/physician/mathematician and inventor, who drew a horoscope for his contemporary Andreas Vesalius, as Cardano did for all celebrities of his generation.

Out of a comparison between horoscope and life's journey, he tried to determine the influence of the planets on one's life. He described Andreas as a 'highly admirable expert in the study of the dissection of bodies, as important as the classical scholars'. The astrologer went on to further praise the anatomist's passion and skill, exceptional intellect and fluency, and he prophesied that the son of the Brussels pharmacist would become famous and would be glorified long after his death.

Scientists of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century did not look down on magic and the occult. Astrology was then as successful a business as it is today, and equally true, am I right? Judging by Cardano's prophetic 'prediction'?

Nonetheless, what is true is that Vesalius was born in a time when two periods of history scraped against and shocked each other like tectonic plates.