

Research Article: History of Anatomy and Embryology

Jean Falcon (1491-1541), a great surgeon and anatomist of the 16th century

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Submitted October 19, 2012; accepted December 31, 2012

Summary

Jean Falcon, an Aragon native, became a famous surgeon at the Faculty of Montpellier. He was a Royal physician, wealthy enough to live a luxurious life and treat influential patients. His lectures were legendary, and his works gave him fame among the surgeons' class. Of all his manuscripts stands the "Guidon", which became an anatomical surgeons' handbook, worthy of reference from the scientific community for centuries.

Key words

Jean Falcon; Gui De Chauliac; Montpellier; anatomist; surgeon; "Guidon".

Biography

Jean Falcon (Fig. 1) was born in at the Kingdom of Aragon, in particular in Catalonia, as mentioned by Astruc (1767). His certificates of birth were all originated as documents from the "Kingdom of Aragon". Among the archives of the Medical Faculty of Avignon a certain Jean Falco(n) was found, thus it is still uncertain if he was the same person as the subject of this article (Wickersheimer 1936). Falcon began his medical education at the end of the 15th century. His name figures among the specialists of the Montpellier University between the years 1498 and 1539 (Dulieu, 1979; Chardon, 1822).

In 1490 the Faculty of Montpellier established a special course for the barber-surgeons, with professor Griffius as a headmaster. In 1505 Jean Garcin, one of the four royal physicians died, and Falcon was invited not only to replace him, but also to be the leading professor on surgeons' course (Malgaigne, 1840). Falcon hoped that in 1539 he might become the Dean of the University and participated to the elections, but the new doctors, unfortunately, voted for Jean Schyron. His date of death is unknown, probably in 1540 or 1541. His name had disappeared from the university's lectures program during 1539, when simultaneously Etienne Corraud was mentioned as the head lecturer. His lessons at the university were celebrated by his young colleagues. From time to time he had collected as payment from his pupils partridges

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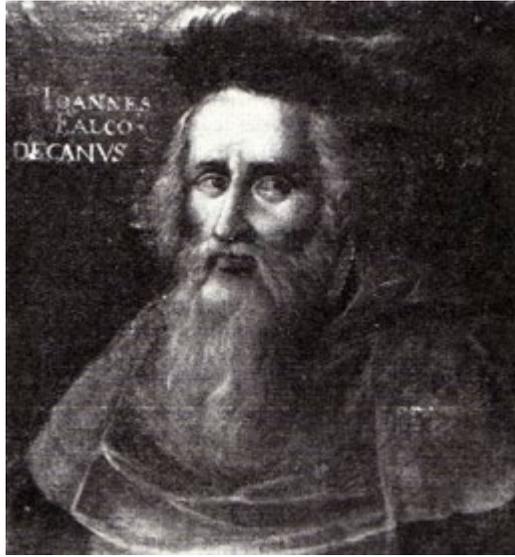


Figure 1 – Jean Falcon. Gravure, artist unknow. Mémoires pour Servir à l’Histoire de la Faculté de Médecine de Montpellier. Astruc, 1767.

and pigeons, leaving suspicions that his lectures were not free of taxation (Germain, 1871). Due to his professorial benefits, his personal fortune grew soon . He rented an apartment in the most beautiful and expensive hotel in the Saint Matthew and became one of the richest physicians of the time (Dulieu, 1979).

He dedicated all his time on medicine, and loved to visit prominent patients to treat. He enjoyed an immense reputation, and successfully treated François I for an urinary infection, possibly syphilis (Dulieu 1979).

The anatomical heritage

Jean Falcon, recognizing faculty’s benefits, bequeathed in return a large series of medical tapestries, “to give honor to medical acts”. Among his esteemed colleagues he had excelled with his work and left his mark in the history of anatomy. His surgical exercise was enriched with a revolutionary anatomical innovative spirit, and gave him the stamp of a recognizable “Renaissance” figure (Dulieu, 1979).

Falcon wrote a great number of works, among which stands the “Additiones ad practicam Antonii Guainerii”, commentating the manuscripts of Antoine Guainerius, a well known physician with a plethora of published medical books between 1497 in Pavia and 1498 in Venice. This rare treatise with detailed anatomical references and portraits was published in Pavia in 1518 and in Lyon in 1525 (Dulieu 1979).

His love for anatomy led him towards surgery, a truly remarkable turn, as during this time the surgical practice was considered only part-professional and separated from true medicine. Louis XII, the 27th March 1514, decided to form local medical

clubs and thus the “Royal College” and “The College of Pop” were established. Until then surgeons were left aside with no handbook to study on. Falcon not only foresaw the training needs for the new clubs, but also caught an opportunity for a significant manuscript dedicated on anatomy. He decided to support his teachings with the scientific work of Guy De Chauliac (Fig. 2), writing the treatise “Commentaires de la Grande Chirurgie de Guy De Chauliac” or simply the “Guidon” (Fig. 3). “Guidon” had soon become the main study tool for surgeons, a real handbook of all required knowledge (Dulieu, 1979; Portal, 1773; Prix de l’académie de chirurgie, 1775-1783).

Falcon’s treatise on Chauliac remained as one of the greatest text on surgery and anatomy for the centuries to come. This book was apparently intended for the use of barber-surgeons in order to educate them and put them in a more scientific path. A plethora of subjects were included, as views on fractures, various kinds of hernia, varicocele, hydrocele and sarcocele, surgical equipment and the dentistry of the period, themes enriched with Falcon’s illustrations (Dulieu, 1979). Some aspects of the text, as Chauliac’s belief that the wounds of the uterus had to be considered mortal, became subjects for scientific debates. Thus Avenzoar took the opposite view, while Avicenna asserted that the entire uterus could be removed safely (Ricci, 1990).



Figure 2 – Guy De Chauliac. BIU Santé, Paris, Collection de portraits.



Figure 3 – The “Guidon”. Images collection, www.biusante.parisdescartes.fr.

Falcon not only gave the first example on commenting works of great surgeons, soon to be followed by others, but also wrote and illustrated an extraordinary manuscript, the “Guidon”, which knew several editions. The first edition was released in Lyon in 1515, with 230 pages, and the last one, again in Lyon, in 1649, with 1000 pages (Dulieu, 1979).

In conclusion

Originating in Aragon, Jean Falcon loved French medicine and soon became a senior physician and leading professor at the Faculty of Montpellier. His treatise has provided the medical historian with an insight into the type of literature available to surgeons of the day, at whatever level of skill and education, and emphasised the continued influence exerted by the works of Guy de Chauliac. Falcon left his mark in the medical literature for his anatomical illustrations composing the works “Additio-

nes ad practicam Antonii Guainerii", and above all the "Guidon", a handbook predecessor of modern surgeon atlases.

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