

# Jacopo Berengario da Carpi: the first anatomy book with a complete series of illustrations

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*Isagoge breves perlucide ac uberime  
in anatomiam humani corporis*  
Venice, 1535

Jacopo Berengario da Carpi's *Short guide to the anatomy of the human body* was first published in Bologna in 1522. This copy is from the Venetian edition of 1535. According to the title page, it was published by Berengario at the insistence of his students; it is a much shorter illustrated guide than the author's earlier commentary (Bologna, 1521) on the anatomy of Mundinus, a mediæval Bolognese anatomist whose work was still in use in the 16th century. Berengario was the leading Italian anatomist of the period immediately preceding the publication of the great *Fabrica* of Andreas Vesalius in 1543, which opened a new era in precise, accurate and beautiful anatomical illustration.

This guide, and Berengario's longer commentary on Mundinus, are the first books to contain a systematic series of illustrations of dissections of the human body. These are printed from woodcuts and fill most of the modestly sized quarto pages, with the rest of the page occupied by text; image and its related text are kept in close relation. The images are too small to present much detail, with the exception of an enlarged view of the bones of the wrist and hand from which it is apparent that either the observations were not acute enough to reveal the details with much accuracy, or that the draughtsmanship and cutting of the block were not sufficiently skilful to present these.

Nevertheless, these anatomical images are a great advance on anything that had been published earlier and it is likely that the style of presentation of the skeletons and 'musclemen' may have influenced the



enormously superior images in the *Fabrica*, whose blocks were cut in Venice, probably in 1542.

The woodcut title page illustration (shown above) of an anatomy – the dissection over several days, preferably in winter, of the whole body or as much of it as could be dissected before the cadaver became unusable from decay – is instructive. The scene depicted is that usually shown in illustrations of mediæval anatomies, although it is likely that Berengario, and perhaps even Mundinus, no longer taught in this way.

Here, the teacher sits at a desk on the right, reading – probably from an anatomical text. The dissection is carried out by a surgeon who stands with knife upraised; the dissector is dressed in a belted tunic as befits one who works with his hands. The features of the cadaver and dissection are pointed out by the *ostentor*, the gowned figure with the wand, and there is at least one other figure wearing what may be a doctor's gown to the teacher's right.

In many illustrations of anatomies of this type and period the cadaver is female, as here. This is of some interest since we know that anatomists had great difficulty in procuring female bodies. Legally acquired cadavers –

and not all were – were the bodies of very recently executed criminals, and court records show that there were many fewer executions of women than of men. Moreover, in many jurisdictions 'female' crimes such as the murder of a husband and, later, witchcraft were often punished by execution in ways that would not leave a body suitable for dissection. We do not know why illustrators tended to show female cadavers in these conventional illustrations of 'anatomies', although illustrating a (rare) female body might possibly indicate the work's completeness.

As to the teacher, in this book Berengario is described as a surgeon, just as Vesalius held authority to teach surgery. But those teaching anatomy were generally trained as physicians; that is, they had followed an academic course in medicine at a university, unlike most practising surgeons who learned their craft by apprenticeship. Berengario seems to have practised both as a physician and surgeon as well as studying and teaching anatomy. Although not a Bolognese by birth, he acquired citizenship and was appointed to the staff of the University of Bologna – an unusual honour for a non-native.

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