This rare little book had been recently most generously given to the Library by Professor Neil Buist, a Fellow of the RCPE. The copy had had rather a hard life – it has lost its first leaf carrying the title page and the portrait of Ambroise Paré and a few pages of the text are damaged. However, almost all of the rest of the text and most of the 74 woodcuts are intact. As well as its purely medical interest – which, as we shall see, is considerable – its historical context is quite remarkable.

Ambroise Paré published two books dated 1561, his *Anatomie Universelle* and *La Méthode Curative des Playes de la Teste Humaine*. For each, the date of finishing printing is given following the privilege; these dates were important because they marked the beginning of the period of nine years during which the privilege protected the works from being copied or reprinted without the author’s permission. The privilege, from King François II, is dated 8 October 1559 and this is also significant. At first sight the dates seem to indicate that the book on head wounds antedates the book on anatomy; however, until 1566, the French new year began in March so *La Méthode Curative* was published in February 1562, almost a year after the *Anatomie* of April 1561. For the second book Paré reprinted the sections on the anatomy of the head, with their woodcut illustrations, from the earlier book and added chapters on the treatment of head wounds and descriptions and illustrations of the surgical instruments required. The anatomical illustrations of both books are rather good reduced copies of some of the woodcuts of the *Fabrica* of Vesalius of 1543 or 1555; Paré acknowledges their source graciously in his introductions ‘Au lecteur’ in both books. His use of the Vesalian illustrations has occasioned comment – not all well-informed. Roth, *History of Vesalius’s works*. According to him ‘the numerous Latin editions [of the *Fabrica*] had distributed everywhere the works and illustrations of Vesalius but were of little use to those who knew no Latin’. The only part of this which is true is that Paré knew no Latin. In 1559, as now, there were only two Latin editions of the *Fabrica*, but his lack of Latin would hardly have prevented Paré from admiring and copying the woodcuts. Nevertheless, Malgaigne tells us that, on this new French edition of 1559 Paré, ‘at once fell eagerly, had several illustrations copied, consulted the text and put in order his own observations…’. Unfortunately for Malgaigne, there was no French edition of the *Fabrica* in 1559; indeed, more than 450 years later, there is still no such edition. Le Paulmier suggested that Vesalius no doubt gave Paré ‘the necessary permission’ to use his figures on the occasion of his visit to Paris in 1559, of which more below, but this is just speculation.

Whatever may have been the trigger to the production of the *Anatomie*, if it was more than just the need for such a book in French, Paré himself tells us his immediate reason for writing a work on the treatment of head wounds. In his dedication to the principal royal physician, Jean Chapelain, Paré says:

> Among the reasons that have moved me to delay no longer in publishing this work, the principal has been one that I cannot describe without the greatest sadness and pain because of the great detriment and misery that it has brought to the Kingdom of France. This was the wound of the late King Henri, our most sovereign lord; for the treatment of which [wound] you, as principal and superintendent, were present at every meeting of the physicians and surgeons charged with his care and, when the opinions of all had been heard, it was you who made the final decision and ordained what should be done in this so perilous a case. And, several times, you graciously asked my opinion and advice on it. 

So, he says, he has called upon his experience to write an account of the anatomy of the head ‘with an account of the operative treatment of the wounds of the same, namely fractures of the skull’. Paré does not exaggerate the importance of Henri II’s wound, sustained in a
tournament on the afternoon of 30 June 1559, which led to his death 11 days later. His death heralded and, though it did not itself produce them, acted as the trigger for the bloody wars of religion which tore France apart during the next three reigns and only finally ended after the accession in 1589 and re-conversion to Catholicism in 1593 of the previously Protestant Henri IV.

On the evidence of the identical privileges of the two books of 1561 and 1562 (granted by François II on 8 October 1559) we see that, within four months of Henri II’s death, Paré was planning to have printed ‘books, treatises, “portraits”, and figures both of anatomy and surgical instruments’. For Paré this was an eventful time. In May 1561 he suffered a complicated fracture of the left tibia and fibula from a horse kick.6 He spent more than three months in bed but finally recovered fully, without even a limp – a remarkable outcome for those times when such fractures were often fatal. Though we have no evidence of it, one cannot help wondering whether he spent some of his enforced rest working on his book on head injuries. In any event, on 1 January 1562, just before the book appeared, he became royal ‘premier chirurgien’ – a post he was to continue to hold for the next three reigns. And, before the end of that year, he was once more on campaign with the royal armies.

THE INJURY AND DEATH OF HENRI II

There have been many accounts of Henri’s injury and its outcome; one of the best modern ones is that of O’Malley and Saunders from 1948.7 Like all others, it is based on information from the sixteenth century; there are many contemporary sources, but most modern writers seem to have paid little attention to how their sources acquired the ‘facts’ that they report, how immediate the information was and whether the report is likely to have been impartial. Of Henri’s injury Alphonse de Ruble8 rightly said: ‘Nothing is more difficult than to know precisely how an event that had thousands of witnesses came about.’ Unfortunately, there is not space here to consider the contemporary evidence of just how the king was injured; many of the details will be found in O’Malley and Saunders, but, to develop as clear a picture of the events as is possible after more than four and a half centuries and, particularly, to put this in its historical context, the original sources must be consulted.

The 65-year war between Spain and France over the control of northern Italy had concluded, in Spain’s favour, with the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis signed on 3 April 1559. To seal the treaty, Henri II’s daughter Elisabeth was to marry Philip II of Spain, whose wife Mary Tudor of England had died the previous year, and Henri’s younger sister Marguerite was to marry the Duke of Savoie. The weddings were to be held in Paris in July and, as part of the celebrations, a tournament took place there at the end of June. On the afternoon of 30 June, the tournament’s last day, Henri had run three courses as defender against three challengers. In the last of these, against Gabriel de Lorges, Count of Montgomery, a captain in the Scots Guard, the king felt he had not acquitted himself well and told the future maréchal, Vieilleville, that he wished to run against de Lorges again saying that ‘he wanted to have his revenge, because he (de Lorges) had knocked him (the king) off balance and almost made him lose his stirrups.’9 In spite of strenuous attempts to dissuade him, Henri summoned de Lorges who demurred saying that he had had his turn and that it was unfair to the other contestants for him to run again. But the king overrode him and commanded him to run again; very reluctantly de Lorges remounted and took a lance. One source claims that the king was so impatient that he did not wait for the visor of his helmet to be fastened;10 if this is true his impatience may well have cost him his life. What happened next we can reconstruct from the English ambassador Throckmorton’s terse account reported to Elizabeth I’s Privy Council on 1 July 1559. Throckmorton, apparently the only ambassador among the spectators, says simply that the king ‘received at the said de Lorges his hands such a counterbuff, as, the blow first lighting upon the king’s head, and taking away the pannage which was fastened to his hedpiece with yron, he did break his staff withall; and so with the rest of the staff hitting the king upon the face gave him such a counterbuff, as he drove a splinte right over his eye on the right side…’. From another witness11 we know that de Lorges failed to throw away the broken stump of his lance and it was this that forced Henri’s visor open and drove splinters over and around the right eye. The king was ‘stunned’ but not immediately unconscious and, at first, it was thought that, though he might lose an eye, his life was not in danger. But by that night he was feverish and, over the next few days, his condition deteriorated, though he rallied briefly on the fourth day.12 Vesalius, by now at the Spanish court, was sent from Brussels by Philip II whose proxy for his marriage, the Duke of Alva, had immediately informed Philip when Henri was injured. But the combined skills of the assembled doctors were ineffective and, on the 11th day, the king died. Both Paré and Vesalius wrote accounts of the king’s illness and death.

For Paré, as we have seen, the death of Henri II seems to have stimulated his publication of the book on head injuries in which it served as an example of the complications of closed head injury – a condition that had been recognised in classical medicine and which was coming to light again in the fever of translation of ‘new’ classical texts. Paré knew that brain injury could occur without skull fracture and he was even aware of brain damage remote from the site of a blow – contrecoup injury. He describes why he believes vomiting and coma often occur in closed head injuries and uses Henri’s fatal injury as a dramatic example.
All – or at least most – of these complications we saw happen to the former King Henry, lately dead, who received a very violent blow from a lance to his body during a tournament which caused his visor to be opened and a splinter from the repercup to strike him above his right eyebrow and cut the muscular tissue of the forehead almost to the bone right across to the nasal corner of the left eye and at the same time several little fragments or shards of the splinter were left in the substance of that eye; but there was no fracture of the bone. From this, because of the agitation or concussion of the brain, he died on the eleventh day after his injury. And after his death we found in him, on the side opposite to the blow, just about the middle of the commissure of the occipital bone, a quantity of blood spread out between the dura and pia mater and an alteration in the brain substance which was red or yellowish in colour over an area of about an inch: and in this part there was the beginning of putrefaction. These were sufficient causes of death of the said lord, and not the damage to the eye. Some people have wanted to blame this [the damage to the eye] for his death, but we have seen several people who have received greater blows than that on the eyes but nevertheless did not die. [Exactly the same text was reprinted in Paré’s Oeuvres of 1575.1]

The book also shows that Paré must have been well-informed about recent anatomical discoveries. In both editions of the Fabrica, Vesalius describes only two ossicles in the middle ear, the malleus and incus. The third ossicle, the stapes, seems first to have been observed by the Sicilian Ingrassia in 1546 and became widely known only after Fallopius described it in 1561. But Paré already knew of it by 1561; he illustrates the stapes in both the Anatomie and the book on head wounds (Figure 1), saying that, as far as he knows, no anatomist has ascribed a function to it, but that perhaps ‘it holds the tympanic membrane up high so that the faculty of hearing may be more perfect’.

I have not mentioned the numerous illustrations of surgical instruments with which Paré intersperses his text. These were necessary because, it seems, there were few – if any – illustrations of these relatively specialised instruments for the treatment of head wounds and skull fractures. To what extent some of these instruments may have been his own invention is not clear.

This little book is a testament to Paré’s knowledge of anatomy and of the best contemporary books on it, of his experience of head injury and the means of treating it and, of course, of his standing in the French surgical community. It is not impossible that his book on head wounds was one of the reasons why Henri II’s second son, the young King Charles IX, appointed Paré, one of those who had treated his father after his wound and had now written a book on head wounds, his principal surgeon in the year of its publication.

Further information about the death of Henri II and the parts played by Paré and Vesalius will be found in the article The Injury and Death of Henri II in the online version of the JRCPE (September 2013).

References
3 Roth M. Andreas Vesalii Bruxellensis. Berlin: G Reimer; 1892. German
5 Malgaigne J-F. Oeuvres complètes d’Ambroise Paré revues et collationnées sur toutes les éditions, avec les variantes... et précédées d’une introduction sur l’origine et les progrès de la chirurgie en Occident... et sur la vie et les ouvrages d’Ambroise Paré, vol I. Paris: Bailliere; 1844. French
6 Le Paulmier C-S. Ambroise Paré d’après de nouveaux documents découverts aux Archives Nationales et des papiers de famille par le docteur Le Paulmier. Paris: Charavay Frères; 1884. French
11 Forbes P. A full view of the public transactions in the reign of Q. Elizabeth: or a particular account of all the memorable affairs of that Queen, transmitted down to us in a series of letters and other papers of state, ...published ...by Dr Forbes. London: printed by J Betteringham, and sold by G Hawkins; 1740–41.
12 Paré A. Les oeuvres de M. Ambroise Paré conseiller, et premier Chirurgien du Roy. Avec les figures & portraits tant de l’anatomie que des instruments de chirurgie, & de plusieurs Monstres... Paris: Gabriel Buon; 1575. French

IML Donaldson, Honorary Librarian, RCPE
(email: i.m.l.d@ed.ac.uk)

The online version of this paper was updated on 10/10/2013.
The injury and death of Henri II

the contributions of Ambroise Paré & Andreas Vesalius

IML Donaldson Honorary Librarian RCPE

On the afternoon of 30 June 1559 King Henri II of France received a head injury in a tournament from which he died 11 days later. His death was of enormous political significance. It happens that he was attended during his illness by two of the greatest contemporary figures in medicine, Ambroise Paré and Andreas Vesalius; what follows is an account of the events and their part in them.

Sources

There have been many accounts of Henri's injury and its fatal outcome; one of the best modern ones is that of O'Malley and Saunders. There have been many accounts of Henri's injury and its fatal outcome; one of the best modern ones is that of O'Malley and Saunders.1 Like all others, it is based on information from the sixteenth century; there are many contemporary sources but most modern writers seem to have paid little attention to how their sources acquired the 'facts' that they report, how immediate the information was and whether the report is likely to have been impartial. Alphonse de Ruble2 rightly said:

Nothing is more difficult than to know precisely how an event that had thousands of witnesses came about. [p. 321. note 4 ff.]

The political importance of the events and their likely effect on the personal positions and even the lives of some of the sources must make us wary. Ambroise Paré and Andreas Vesalius both attended the injured King, took part in decisions about his treatment and attended – indeed, probably performed – the post-mortem examination on which they reported. On them we rely principally for medical details. But neither describes the circumstances in which the wound occurred. Of these at least two eyewitnesses left accounts. Elizabeth had ascended the English throne in 1558 and her ambassador to the French court, Sir Nicholas Throckmorton, wrote several times a week to the Privy Council or to the Queen herself during June and July 1559. His letters contain very full descriptions of the evolution of affairs. He was also an eyewitness having, as he said, a clear view of the joust in which the King was wounded. In addition, when he reports information Throckmorton almost always says how, or from whom, he acquired it. He is an impeccable contemporary source. The correspondence between the Privy Council and Throckmorton has been preserved among the English State Papers and is quite well summarised in O'Malley and Saunders.1

The other eyewitness account is from the memoirs of Vieilleville, a senior and much respected military commander, later Maréchal de France, who, unlike Throckmorton, was directly involved in the tournament, and certainly had a personal interest in how events were presented. On the King’s orders he armed Henri for the fatal course and, later, would advise the dying King not to leave the throne to his eldest son François, young husband of Mary Queen of Scots; his fears that religious strife would result were to be amply justified. His memoirs were written, not by himself but by his secretary of many years, Vincent Carloix,3 to whom he gave his papers; they were only published when they were discovered in the middle of the eighteenth century. So, though he was an eyewitness, his account was written many years after the events, and not by himself.

There are many other letters about the events preserved in state papers in European cities from
ambassadors and representatives reporting to their masters; some of the writers may have been eye-witnesses, but it is often difficult to know what were their sources of information if they were not themselves witnesses. Many of these letters are quoted by Romier. Some of them give details of the King’s illness in the 11 days he survived but we know (see below) that everyone except a few of the very great, the medical attendants and immediate body servants, was strictly excluded from the sickroom so the details reported by others must, presumably, have been acquired from servants who were no doubt paid well for whatever information they provided, or possibly, from some of the medical attendants. How much they can be relied upon is somewhat uncertain.

The injury

Briefly, the 65 year war between Spain and France over the control of northern Italy had concluded, in Spain’s favour, with the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis signed on 3 April 1559. To seal the treaty, Henri II’s daughter Elisabeth was to marry Phillip II of Spain, whose wife Mary Tudor of England had died the previous year, and Henri’s younger sister Marguerite was to marry the Duke of Savoie. The weddings were to be held in Paris in July and, as part of the celebrations, a tournament took place there at the end of June.

By 1559 tournaments had become uncommon but Henri seems to have been interested in the chivalric code and it was probably at his particular instance that this somewhat old-fashioned entertainment was arranged. Certainly the King was an active participant. A large space was cleared at the top of the Rue St Antoine, in front of the royal palace of the Hôtel des Tournelles, the ground prepared for the lists and stands built for the principal guests. On the afternoon of 30 June, the tournament’s last day, Henri had engaged to run three courses as defender against three challengers. Arming the King was the prerogative of the Master of Horse (Le Grand Escuyer), who was present, but the King specifically ordered Vieilleville to arm him and he: ‘as he placed his helmet on his [the King’s] head could not prevent himself from saying, with a deep sigh, that he had never done anything in his life so much against his will.’ [ref. 3 p.283] But the King had no time to ask the reason for this because: ‘at that moment the Duke of Savoie presented himself, fully armed...’ [ref. 3 p.283]

The Duke of Savoie was the first of the King’s three arranged challengers; after him he ran against ‘M de Guise’ – Henri, Duke of Guise - then against de Lorges, Count of Montgomery (often spelled Montgonmery in the contemporary accounts). In this third course the King felt he had not acquitted himself well and so, against the rules of the tournament, he decided to run again against de Lorges, saying to Vieilleville that: ‘... he wanted to have his revenge, because he (de Lorges) had knocked him (the King) off balance and almost made him lose his stirrups.’ [ref. 3 p.283]

In spite of strenuous attempts to dissuade him, by Vieilleville - who was awaiting his own turn to run and offered to run on his behalf – and by others, Henri summoned de Lorges who demurred saying that he had had his turn and that it was unfair to the other contestants for him to run again. Indeed it was against the rules. But the King overrode him and commanded him to run again; very reluctantly de Lorges remounted and took a lance. According to Alphonse de Ruble, quoting Gaspard de Saulx-Tavannes: the King was so impatient that he did not wait for the visor of his helmet to be fastened; if this is true his impatience may well have cost him his life. However, de Saulx-Tavannes does not say definitely that the visor was unfastened; according to him: ‘some people blamed the armourer, others the impatience of the King in not waiting for his visor to be fastened’ [ref. 5 p. 242]; it seems he is reporting rumour not observation. De Lorges was 29, Henri 40 years-old. What happened next we can reconstruct from Throckmorton’s terse account and the additional details given by Vieilleville.
Throckmorton, apparently the only ambassador among the spectators, says\textsuperscript{6} simply that the King:

...received at the said de Lorges his hands such a counterbuff, as, the blow first lighting upon the King’s head, and taking away the pannage which was fastened to his hedpiece with yron, he did break his staff withall; and so with the rest of the staff hitting the King upon the face gave him such a counterbuff, as he drove a splinte right over his eye on the right side...

Vieilleville adds important details:

... both having run valiantly and broken their lances with great skill and address, the clumsy de Lorges did not throw away – as was the usual procedure – the shaft remaining in his hand, the broken lance, but kept it still lowered and, as he rode forward, it encountered the king’s head running straight into the visor which the blow raised and ruptured an eye... [ref. 3 p.283]

We must remember that the two witnesses had different views of the events which, in any case, would have happened very rapidly. The medical reports support Throckmorton – the eye was not destroyed; but Vieilleville’s observations that the broken lance was not discarded as it should have been and that it pushed up the closed visor make it easier to understand that, although Henri absolved de Lorges from blame, perhaps he had been careless.
The witnesses concur that the King was stunned though not unhorsed; the horse bolted and was caught just in front of where Throckmorton was standing. Henri was disarmed right in front of Throckmorton who wrote:

... was unarmed in the field even against the place where I stode: and as I could discerne, the hurt seemed not to be great; whereby I judge, he is but in little daunger...

A large splinter was removed immediately and Henri was motionless when he was carried off

...but laye as one amased.

**Henri's illness and death**

The King was carried into the Royal palace of Tournelles (which overlooked the lists) to his room of which Henri put Vieilleville in charge.

...which was closed and forbidden to all except those who could be of service such as physicians, surgeons, apothecaries, servants and grooms of the body; even the Queen was excluded to avoid increasing her distress and none of the princes presented himself. [ref. 3 p. 284]

The Royal physicians and surgeons assembled, under the direction, as Paré tells us, of the principal physician Jean Chapelain. Vieilleville recounts that:

...five or six surgeons tried to enlarge the wound and 'sound the part of the brain into which splinters of the lance might have penetrated.' [ref. 3 p.284]

He was probably misinterpreting attempts to remove splinters from the orbit – no competent sixteenth century surgeon would have tried to pass a probe through the orbit into the brain. For four days, apparently, they also experimented with the heads of four newly-decapitated criminals.

...striking them with great force with the stump of the lance along the path taken in the King's wound

and dissecting them;

but in vain. [ref. 3 p.284]

Quite what was in vain is unclear; maybe they were trying to decide if the King's skull was likely to be fractured. Perhaps significantly, neither Paré nor Vesalius mentions these experiments.

Throckmorton's initial impression that the wound was not dangerous was reinforced on the first of July when:

...I used all the means to me possible t'understand his state at the second dressing [ref. 6 p. 154]

He was told that:

... the hurt was great and painful to him

but also that the common opinion was that his life was not in danger. [ref. 6 p. 154]
That afternoon the Constable sent a message to Throckmorton saying that he should not be misinformed and that:

...he was sent to tell me that he was in no danger, God be thanked, but that there was good hope he shuld be well shortly as all the surgeons had certainly declared [ref. 6 p. 154]

However, on direct questioning it was admitted that the King might lose his eye. Throckmorton now declared that he had delayed writing to Queen Elizabeth but, since the news was now good, he would do so in the next day or two. The Constable was clearly intent on trying to manage the political situation – relations between France and England were strained; there were English fears – probably justified – that there would be French intervention against the Scottish reformers who were in revolt against the Scots government and the tension had been heightened considerably by the inclusion of the Royal Arms of England in the armorial bearings of the heralds of the Dauphin and his wife, the Queen of Scots, which were displayed during the festivities. Throckmorton had complained about this on his mistress’s behalf, but been fobbed off. The resulting alarm and anger in England were well-founded; Mary had a good claim to the English throne and, if Henri died and the Dauphin succeeded him, she would be Queen of France as well as of Scotland. If the French then intervened successfully in Scotland there was a very real threat both to Elizabeth’s throne and to the Protestant faith there. With France and Spain now at peace the French forces were freed for adventures abroad; the addition of the arms of England to those of France and Scotland at the tournament could be, and fairly certainly was, seen as a declaration of hostile intent.

In the meantime the Duke of Alva, King Philip’s representative and proxy for his marriage, had sent word to his monarch in Brussels who dispatched Vesalius to Paris where he arrived on 3 July. A remark in a contemporary history by one ‘Adam Henricpetri’ – a pseudonym (probably of Philips van Marnix van St-Aldegonde) – says that, as soon as Vesalius entered the King’s room he did a:

![Guy de Chauliac's test for skull fracture.](par-methode-curative-des-playes-de-la-teste-humaine-fol-cxvii-r.)

Test with a clean white cloth which he put into the King’s mouth then struck rather firmly at which the King flung up his hand and complained bitterly [of the pain of] the wound. Vesalius concluded from the severity of the pain that it was ‘chironium vulnus’ – an incurable wound.

O’Malley and Saunders discuss this test and conclude that:

The test employed by Vesalius, as described by Henricpetri, would seem to have been an original but somewhat severe method of eliciting the head flexion sign used in the diagnosis of meningitis and is, so far as we are aware, the first test of this nature to be described. [ref. 1 p. 213].

This view has been repeated by later writers. None of these commentators seems to wonder why Vesalius should do this curious test. It would seem a very complicated and probably not very effective means of inducing head flexion, even if there were any evidence that any of the medical attendants had any knowledge of meningismus or its significance. But Paré’s book on head wounds provides a different and much more...
likely explanation, that this was a test for an occult skull fracture. The King’s doctors were not concerned about whether he had meningeal infection – how could they be since its existence was quite unknown. But they were concerned whether the King’s skull was fractured. In his discussion of ‘conjectural’ signs of fracture of the skull Paré includes a test described by ‘Guidon’. Now, in this context, Guidon – or, rather, ‘Le Guidon’ – was the famous book of surgery by the fourteenth century Guy de Chauliac and the name was used both for the book and its author. Several French translations of the medieval text would have been available to Paré. Here is Paré’s description of the test which is much fuller than that in Le Guidon:

I want to repeat here the information given by Guidon, who says that when a fracture [of the skull] is uncertain, if one wishes to know whether, indeed, the bone is ruptured, one must put a cord between the patient’s teeth and strike it. For, immediately, the patient will move his hand to the site of the fracture to show it to the surgeon. But I have not been able to find this in my experience for all that I have treated several patients who had fractures of the skull apparent to the view. And, following Guidon's instructions, I had them grip a cord or a handkerchief in their teeth; nevertheless, not having neglected to hold it [the cord or cloth] firmly, they did not seem to complain nor to show me the place where the bone was fractured. For this reason I cannot well confirm that this argument of Guidon’s is reliable since I have not found it so by experience...

If this test was, indeed, carried out – and how Henricpetri knew about it we do not know – then, if ‘Le Guidon’ was believed, it was positive – the skull was fractured. But this would not, in itself, have been a reason for the inevitably fatal prognosis that Vesalius is said to have pronounced. Many skull fractures were treated successfully. In fact, as we know from the post-mortem reports, Henri’s skull was not fractured. None of the other sources seems to mention the test and neither it nor his claimed fatal prognosis is included by Vesalius in his account of the progress of the illness or the post-mortem. Paré did not believe the test was useful – and he spoke from considerable experience. Did Vesalius not mention it because the post-mortem showed it to have been misleading – or, of course, did he never do such a test, and probably never make such a prognosis? As far as I can discover Henricpetri is our only source for the test and Vesalius’s fatal prognosis. One part of his story, though, does have the ring of truth. Calling the wound *chironium vulnus* – a classical allusion to an incurable, fatal wound (see discussion in O’Malley and Saunders) was just the kind of remark that might have been expected from a doctor concerned to demonstrate his superior learning. Throckmorton says:

Vesalius, Philip’s physician and surgeon, who was long with the Emperor Charles, is come hither to look to the King, and has the special charge over him. [letter to Privy Council 8 July]

So Vesalius had a position to maintain. The assumption seems to have been that Vesalius was called to Paris because of his international renown as a medical practitioner and there is no doubt that he seems to have been highly regarded at the Spanish court – though he was never principal physician or surgeon there. He is also reported as being regarded as some kind of oracle by the assembled French physicians and surgeons; but this seems unlikely to have been because of their regard for him as a clinician. It seems to me much more likely that he was sent by Philip, certainly as a skilled doctor, but particularly as an earnest of Philip’s new attachment to his old enemy, Henri, now about to become both his father-in-law and his ally. Vesalius was a very great anatomist; I am not convinced that we have evidence that he was a great clinician. However, his presence at Henri’s treatment was no doubt a comfort to the native physicians and surgeons who must have felt responsibility weigh very heavily upon them in a case that was medically difficult and politically dangerous. There may have been considerable relief that a foreigner had ‘the special charge over’ the King – or, rather, was publicly supposed to have it. Paré’s explicit statement (ref. 8
Henri rallied on the fourth day and his fever abated; this was probably the day of Vesalius’s arrival – it depends whether the day of the injury was considered the ‘first day.’ Hope rose but the respite was temporary; the fever returned and he became intermittently comatose. He may have had a further short period of lucidity but his breathing become stertorous and he began to have convulsions. On the tenth day he was given extreme unction and on the eleventh, the 10 July 1559, he died. Vesalius’s report,** translated in full in O’Malley and Saunders† gives a credible account of the progress of the illness and the findings at post-mortem.

For Paré, the death of Henri II seems to have stimulated his publication of the book on head injuries* in which it served as an example of the complications of closed head injury – a condition that had been recognised in classical medicine and which was coming to light again in the fever of translation of ‘new’ classical texts. Paré was perfectly aware that brain injury could occur without skull fracture and he was even aware of injury remote from the site of a blow – contrecoup injury. He describes why he believes vomiting and coma to occur in closed head injuries and uses Henri’s fatal injury as a dramatic example.

Exactly the same text was reprinted in Paré’s Oeuvres of 1575.10

In fact, it seems likely that infection was involved as well as the subdural haematoma; Vesalius notes that numerous wood splinters were still present in the right orbit and both he and Paré speak of ‘putrefaction.’ It seems likely that the blood clot had become infected, perhaps via the venous drainage from the orbit.

I have written so much about the death of Henri because of its historical importance as well as the light it throws on what was understood in the mid-sixteenth century about closed head injury – at least by that exceptional surgeon Ambroise Paré.

The political consequences

This is not the place to go into much detail of the enormous political consequences of the death of Henri II of France. It heralded a terrible period in French history. The immature François II succeeded but died before the end of the next year (1560). His widow Mary, Queen of Scotland since her infancy, having been Queen of France for just over a year, returned to Scotland in 1561.
Catherine de Medici became regent for Henri’s second son Charles IX who acceded to the throne in 1560 aged 10. Catherine – long cast as rabidly and viciously Catholic – was, in fact, inclined to moderation and compromise. But the Guises, the Duke of Guise and the Cardinal of Lorraine, became increasingly powerful and were determined to take all measures to eradicate the heresy of Protestantism. The wars of religion began in earnest; the infamous massacre of St Bartholomew’s Eve in 1572 was only the most dramatic of many bloody incidents. The civil wars continued until the protestant Henri IV decided to re-convert to Catholicism in 1593, four years after his accession to the French throne. His ally, Elizabeth of England, was furious at his apparent desertion of the Protestant cause. In reality, though, Henri IV retained a great deal of affection for, and loyalty to, his former comrades in arms. The most overt example is his Edict of Nantes of 1598 which granted some freedom of worship and security to Protestants; but Henri also appointed Protestant royal physicians who were also iatrochemists and this, in turn, frustrated the wishes of the strongly neo-Galenic Faculté de Médecine to eradicate iatrochemical practice (see ref. 12 for a few more details).

As far as Britain was concerned the preoccupation of France with its internal wars meant that it was less inclined to spare troops for foreign interventions which, in turn, made it easier for the Scots reformers to maintain their ascendancy and reduced the threat to Protestant England.

Notes

§ Later writers have made much of the attempts to dissuade the King from running a fourth course; many claim that Michel de Nostredame (Nostradamus) had predicted the King’s death in his ‘prophecies’ of 1555 and this prediction has become something of a folk-myth. But no contemporary source mentions such a prophecy relating to the King and the supposed interpretation of Nostradamus’s ‘prophecy’ as predicting Henri’s death in a tournament was not made until the next century. Vielleville’s memoires report his misgiving while he was arming the King and that, after his injury, Henri said that he had been right to try to dissuade him. Some contemporary accounts speak of attempts at dissuasion by others – not, apparently, because of any prophecy but because the day was hot, the hour late and the King’s jousts officially finished. No doubt the Royal family was nervous - severe injury and even death were not uncommon at these events – and one can easily understand that after his running three courses unscathed they felt it wise that he do no more.

* Modern writers have claimed that Vesalius travelled from Brussels to Paris ‘by special coach’ (O’Malley and Saunders ref. 1 p. 209) or even ‘having travelled 300 km by mail coach in 48 h.’ (Martin).13 Henricpetri’s text (ref. 8 ccclxi) says Vesalius was sent ‘auff der Post von Brüssel gen Pariss’ but ‘Post’ here does not mean mail coach or any other kind of coach. It was the system of relays of fresh horses maintained along principal routes for the use of urgent couriers, generally on royal business – a similar system had been established centuries earlier across much of the Roman Empire. It was the fastest way to travel in the sixteenth century when roads would usually have been quite impassable by coach; also, coaches were only invented in the middle of the century and were a considerable novelty even in cities; post (or mail)-coaches were an eighteenth century innovation. Thus are myths generated and perpetuated.

** The text of Vesalius’s report, apparently written after his return to Brussels, was long lost. The Latin text reproduced by Ruble [ref. 2 pp. 432-435] is that of a sixteenth century copy of the report preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. O’Malley and Saunders (ref. 1) provide a full English translation.
References


6. Forbes, P A full view of the public transactions in the reign of Q. Elizabeth: or a particular account of all the memorable affairs of that Queen, transmitted down to us in a series of letters and other papers of state, … published …by Dr. Forbes. … London : printed by J. Bettenham, and sold by G. Hawkins, 1740-41. p. 151.


