SDC 5: The relationship between Colombo and Michelangelo.

Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), the premier biographer of Renaissance artists and an earlier apprentice to Michelangelo, wrote in his *Vita de'pui eccellenti* that "in his old age [Michelangelo] suffered from gravel in his urine which finally turned into kidney stones, and for many years he was in the hands of Master Realdo Colombo, his very close friend who treated him with injections and looked after him carefully."[a] Ascanio Condivi (1525–74) was a subsequent assistant of Michelangelo and his second authorized biographer. Like Michelangelo, Condivi called Colombo a friend, and also praised the professional care and diligence extended to his aging mentor. He also noted that Michelangelo [through Colombo] had shared "many rare and recondite facts, perhaps never before understood …"[b] In this biography of Michelangelo (published 1553), also often simply called the *Vita*, Condivi wrote about his own hopes to participate in publishing such abstruse secrets, particularly for "the advantage of painters and sculptors." One may imagine that the LPS was among those revealed secret things as most of the human skeletal musculature was well recognized. Although the actions of the LPS were externally visible, the muscle's origins were hidden within the orbit and easily overlooked, that is, until it was discovered and described by Colombo. The theological explanation for the very existence of the levator of the eyelid was depicted in one of Michelangelo's most famous paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, *The Creation of Adam* (1508–12), i.e. at the moment Adam and the first human LPS muscles were created, both LPS muscles are active with their adjacent superior recti.

Colombo likely showed Michelangelo other secret anatomic structures hidden from an exterior view of the body such as the upper urinary tract where the polymath's renolithiasis originated. Colombo prescribed certain fluids in abundance for his friend, though he had often "cut for stone" in others. He also had the occasion to discover calculi postmortem, as he did in the case of the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556). In spite of occasions of excruciating agony during the passage of his kidney stones, Michelangelo retained a sense of humor writing in one of his poems, "I myself have gotten to know urine and the little tube it comes out of."[c] Colombo may have shown Michelangelo that, contrary to accepted "wisdom," the superior pole of left kidney is situated more cephelad than the right, not

the other way around.[d] Although without illustrations, Colombo would be the first to publish a correction of this error that had persisted for well over a millennium.

At that time, the minute stapes was a little-known discovery that might have been demonstrated privately to Michelangelo. As in the case of the LPS, both Colombo and Falloppio continue to play central roles in the ongoing controversy over the discovery of this structure.[e] Perhaps publicly demonstrated by the Sicilian physician Gian Filippo Ingrassia (1510–80) as early as 1546, it was already published in Valencia by Pedro Jimeno [Ximeno] (1515–51) in 1549.[f] In a manual of anatomy (1556), Colombo's student and assistant, Valverde, provided the first illustration of this third ossicle that Vesalius and others had overlooked. To Vesalius' chagrin, Valverde's figure closely mimicked one in the *Fabrica* with just the addition of a tiny, triangular stirrup atop the incus. The legend erroneously stated, "The third ossicle which has been mentioned by no one before me," a claim that was echoed by Colombo three years later. Falloppio, a great supporter of Vesalius, was quick to accuse Colombo of falsifying his claim of priority basing his accusation upon an incompletely remembered, second-hand account from an unnamable former student at Pisa and second-hand accounts of Colombo's former students in Rome. Falloppio further admitted that he had made the same "false claim" of priority in his own lectures.

Valverde's plagiarism of illustrations is undeniable, but Colombo's close association with his assistant certainly left him open to attack. Only four of Valverde's forty-two copperplates were completely original. The others closely followed those of the *Fabrica* but were of lesser quality.[g] Though Vesalius was incensed by Valverde's plagiarism of his illustrations and his criticisms of the *Fabrica*, one original illustration in the Spaniard's book was Valverde's famous and striking "muscle man" whom he posed grasping a dagger in his left hand while holding up his own flayed skin in his right. The inspired printed image was an obvious homage to the figure of St. Bartholomew in Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*.

By the time Condivi's biography of the seventy-eight-year-old Michelangelo was published with twice-mentioned references to Colombo, the anatomist was fifty-three and closer to completion of his text intended for students and practitioners of medicine and anatomy. It is not known if these preparations were a modification of his intended collaboration with Michelangelo or a separate new undertaking. As opined in this essay's introduction, Colombo's

decision not to publish anatomic illustrations was made, not out of a reluctance to "break with classical tradition,"[h] but rather likely based more upon financial factors – his own and those of his publisher in Venice. Regardless, the final product confirms that Colombo's hopes of publishing illustrations, surpassing the quality and accuracy of those in the *Fabrica*, had evaporated. Michelangelo's stamina and interest in dissection was beginning to wane and indeed even "turned his stomach so that he could neither eat nor drink with benefit." The aging artist instead devoted attention to the unfinished dome of St. Peter's Basilica that he had completely redesigned and he likely reserved his remaining energies for his poetry.[i]

References / SDC 5

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[h] Singer C, Rabin C. *op. cit.* 1946; iv–v. [*See* d above.]

[i] Wallace WE. *Michelangelo, God's Architect: The Story of His Final Years and Greatest Masterpiece.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019; 157.