

A portrait medal of Paracelsus on his death in 1541 / by F.P. Weber.

Contributors

Weber, Frederick Parkes, 1863-1962.
Royal College of Surgeons of England

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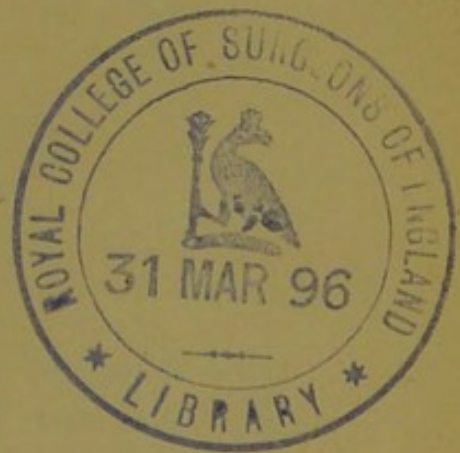
Wellcome Collection
183 Euston Road
London NW1 2BE UK
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722
E library@wellcomecollection.org
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A
PORTRAIT MEDAL OF PARACELSUS
ON HIS DEATH IN 1541.

BY
F. P. WEBER, M.D., F.S.A.

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1893.

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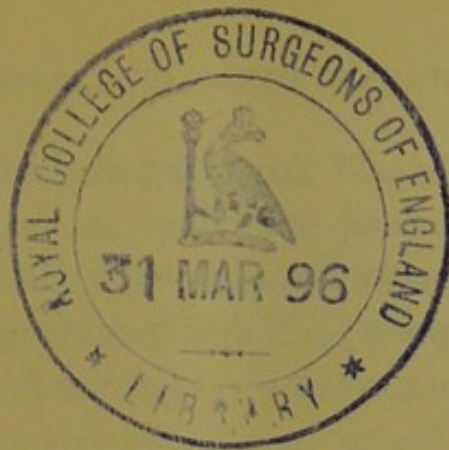
OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

AS REVISED AND AMENDED

BY THE CONVENTION OF 1794

AND THE LEGISLATURE

1794



A PORTRAIT MEDAL OF PARACELSUS ON HIS DEATH
IN 1541.

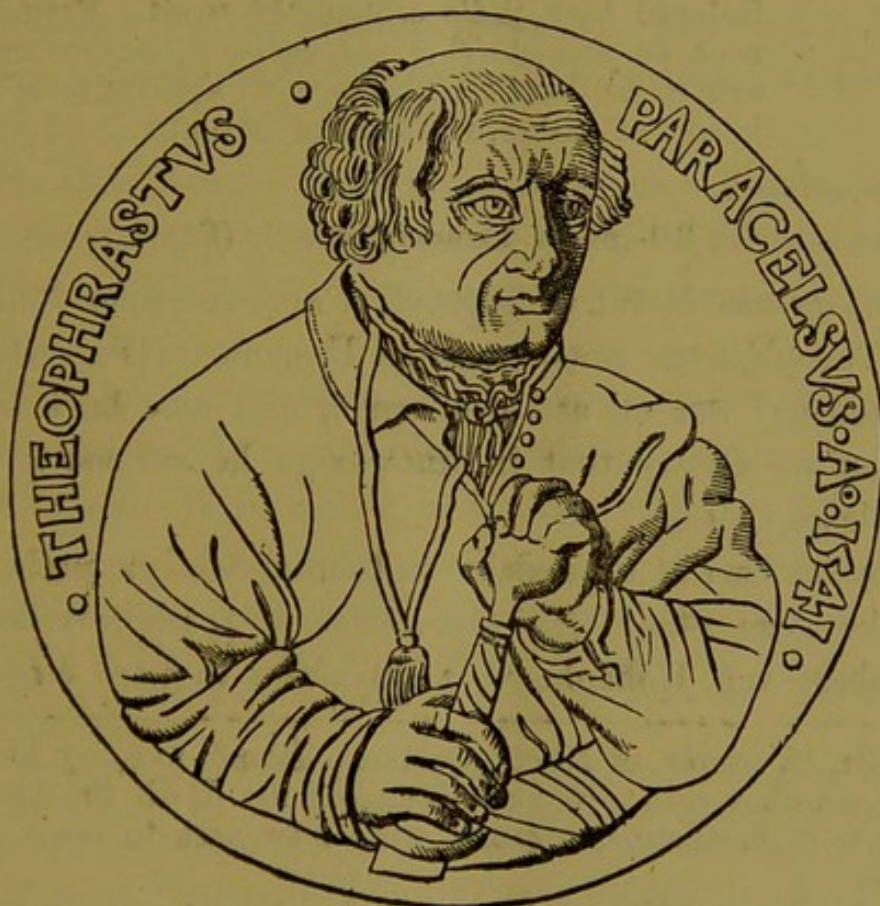


Fig. 1.

Now that all those who have best studied his works have come to the conclusion that Paracelsus was not "the prince of ignorant quacks," but that he really made great progress in the practice of medicine, original

medals of him have, I think, acquired additional interest. The following medal (exhibited at the meeting of the London Numismatic Society on 15 Dec., 1892) appears to be of contemporary, or nearly contemporary work, and as yet I have not come across any published description of it.¹

Obv.—THEOPHRASTVS . PARACELSVS . A° . 1541 .

Half-length figure, facing, of Paracelsus, with his head slightly inclined to the spectator's right hand. The face is without hair and the lines are very harshly expressed. He is dressed in a loose gown fastened by a girdle around the waist. From his neck an amulet (?) is suspended by a thin cord, and in his hands he holds what appears to be the handle of a large, two-handed² sword.

Rev.—Blank.

Lead; 3.1 inches diameter; cast. (Fig. 1.)

The names in full of Paracelsus were Aureolus Philipus Theophrastus Bombastes von Hohenheim Paracelsus. Paracelsus³ was an assumed name, and may have been chosen to signify that in knowledge he surpassed the physician Celsus.

He was born at Einsiedeln⁴ in Canton Schwyz, probably in the year 1493. His father was, it is said, Wilhelm Bombast von Hohenheim, a physician in poor circum-

¹ Dr. H. Storer, of Newport, Rhode Island, has very kindly sent me what seems to be a complete list of all the known medals of Paracelsus, together with references to many portraits.

² On the portraits of Paracelsus the handle appears to be too big for any but a two-handed sword, as Dr. Storer, jun., suggested that it was.

³ Others, who deny his noble parentage, think that Paracelsus was a hybrid classical rendering of Höhener or Höchener, which they consider to have been his true name.

⁴ From his birthplace, Einsiedeln, he also called himself "Eremita."

stances, probably the natural son of a German noble of that name.

Paracelsus studied first under his father, but soon took to a wandering life, and is said to have visited France, Spain, Italy, Hungary, the Netherlands, and even England, picking up everywhere what useful information he could. On his return he was made, in 1527, Professor of Medicine at Basel, where his fame became great; and it was about this time that he gave advice to the illustrious Erasmus of Rotterdam.⁵ In 1528, however, when the rich Canon Von Lichtenfels refused to pay his fee, Paracelsus quarrelled with the magistrate because of an adverse judgment, and had to quit Basel.

He then recommenced his wanderings. His last resting-place was Salzburg, where he died in September, 1541, probably from injuries received at the hands of his enemies' servants.

There is some doubt about the precise age of Paracelsus at his death. It has been variously given as forty-five,⁶ forty-seven,⁷ forty-eight,⁸ and even fifty or fifty-one.⁹

⁵ A letter of Paracelsus to Erasmus and the reply of Erasmus are printed in the editions of his collected works. See his works, edited by J. Huser, Basel, quarto vol. iii., 1599, pp. 260 and 261.

⁶ The age forty-five occurs with the date 1541 on a medal described in C. L. Duisburg's edition of C. A. Rudolphi, *Recentioris ævi numismata virorum de rebus medicis et physicis meritorum*. . . . Danzig, 1862-3, octavo, p. 99, cclxviii., No. 2.

⁷ As on a portrait described by Dr. J. S. W. Moehsen, *Verzeichniss einer Sammlung von Bildnissen grösten theils berühmter Aerzter*. Berlin, 1771, vol. ii. p. 100.

⁸ Another portrait mentioned by Moehsen, *op. cit.*, p. 100. This age is likewise given in the *Universal-Lexicon*, J. H. Zedler, Leipzig and Halle, 1740.

⁹ As the writer in the ninth edition, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, gives the year of his birth as 1490, 1491, or 1493, and

For the two latter ages I can find no early support. It seems to be generally agreed that Paracelsus died on the 23rd or 24th September, 1541, and most authorities state that he was born in 1493. If these authorities be correct then his age at death must have been forty-seven or forty-eight, according as he was born before or after September in 1493. This point can, therefore, only be settled if we know the day or month of his birth. If the statement be true that he was born on 17th December, 1493,¹⁰ his age at death must have been forty-seven, and this is confirmed by two portraits dated 1538,¹¹ giving his age as forty-five.

The occurrence of the age forty-five on a medal⁶ bearing the date of his death (1541) may be explained by supposing that the likeness on this medal has been copied from a portrait taken in 1538; for instance, one of the two just mentioned.¹¹ Indeed, medals with similar likenesses¹² exist, giving his age as forty-five, but undated.

Although the present medal seems to differ from other medals of Paracelsus hitherto published, yet the likeness on this and most of the other medals¹³ and known por-

the date of his death as 1541. He makes the age of Paracelsus at death either 51, 50, 49, 48, or 47.

¹⁰ See the article in Brockhaus *Conversations-lexikon*, 13th edition.

¹¹ If these portraits were produced for or after his birthday in December. The two portraits are mentioned by Moehsen, *op. cit.*, vol. ii. p. 100.

¹² See figure in *Trésor de Numismatique*, Paris, folio, the volume with German medals, 1841, Pl. X. No. 7.

¹³ For other medals, see especially Rudolphi, *op. cit.* edition of Duisberg, pp. 99, 100. There are also figures in Franz van Mieris, *Histori der Nederlandsche Vorsten*, Graavenhaage, 1735, folio, vol. iii. p. 44, and Köhler, *Historische Münz-belustigung*, vol. xi., Nürnberg, 1739, 4to, p. 369; also *Trésor de Numismatique*, Paris, folio, 1841; *Médailles Allemandes*, Pl. X. No. 7.

traits¹⁴ are so similar as to suggest that they have been derived by copying the one from the other. To decide which are the original likenesses would demand a careful comparison of the scattered portraits and portrait medallions. One original likeness was probably made in 1538, another may be that attributed to Tintoret.¹⁵

The complete absence of hair on the face in most of these portraits no doubt furnished a pretext for the statements of his enemies that he was a eunuch,¹⁶ with which state-

¹⁴ For portraits of Paracelsus see list given by Moehsen, *op. cit.*, pp. 99—101, and plates in various books, as in that of Professor Thomas Erastus, containing his vigorous attack on the doctrines of Paracelsus, and in the book of *Paracelsus De Urinarum*, &c., both of which are referred to below. (See figures taken from copies in the British Museum by kind permission of the authorities.)

¹⁵ This portrait is altogether different from the others. The plate is signed "F. Chauveau Sculpsit," "I. Tintoret ad vivum pinxit." It forms the frontispiece to the Latin edition of his works, published at Geneva, 1658, folio.

¹⁶ The story of the castration of the child Paracelsus by a hog may be fitly compared to a similar story about Boileau. This story accounts for Boileau's satires on women by saying that he was a eunuch, owing to an injury received in childhood from a turkey. Hence also his hatred of the Jesuits who introduced turkeys into France!

Cf. also the statement of Paracelsus' bitterest enemy, Thomas Erastus, the physician and theologian, *Disputationum de medicinâ novâ Philippi Paracelsi pars prima*, Basileæ (? 1572), p. 238:—"Eunuchum fuisse, cum alia multa, tum facies, indicant et quod, Oporino teste, feminas prorsus despexit." This Thomas Erastus (Lieber or Lieber) was born about 1523, and died at Basel, 1st January, 1583. He was Professor of Medicine at Heidelberg, and afterwards Professor of Ethics at Basel. In his book on excommunication he founded the doctrines called after him, Erastianism. The Oporinus mentioned here was the celebrated book printer at Basel, who lived 1507—1568. Besides being *famulus* to Paracelsus about 1528, he was afterwards, in 1533, made Professor of Latin at Basel, and in 1537—39 was Professor of Greek there.

ment extracts from Paracelsus' own writings¹⁷ seem singularly at variance, as well as the general strength and vigour of his character. Moreover the portrait attributed to Tintoret has moustaches and beard.

The object suspended from the neck of Paracelsus appears to be an amulet, and this must also have lent some support to the assertions of his enemies, that he was unduly superstitious and credulous in amulets.

Another difficulty has been to explain the nature of the object which Paracelsus is represented as holding in his hands. Various suggestions have been offered, but I have little doubt that the usual explanation is correct, namely, that the object held is the handle of the sword, though certainly one of peculiar form for the time.

On some of the portraits one of the cross-guards is represented, and there can be then no doubt of its being a sword-handle.

The object held looks least like a sword-handle in a medal figured in Köhler (*Münz-belustigung*, vol. xi. p. 369), but even here in the text it is described as a sword-handle. Some doubt might arise from the word AZOTH being inscribed on the pommel in the medal figured by Van Mieris.¹⁸ This word "Azoth"¹⁹ was the

¹⁷ As in the introduction to his book *Paragranum*, when he says that "his beard had more experience than all the universities."

¹⁸ Van Mieris, *op. cit.*, vol. iii., p. 44.

¹⁹ For the "Azoth" of Paracelsus and the immense healing power ascribed to it, at any rate by his successors, see E. T. Hessling, *Theophrastus redivivus, illustratus, coronatus et defensus*, Hamburg, 1663, 4to, p. 7. CAPUT II.: "Wie solche Artzney, *azothi*, in allen Krankheiten mit Gott glücklichen von Jungen und Alten kan gebraucht werden; und dadurch nechst göttlicher Hülfe Krancken curiret worden sind."

name given to the famous preparation of Paracelsus, which, probably chiefly by his successors, was magnified into a sort of panacea. That here, also, the object held in the hands of Paracelsus is a sword-handle is proved by a plate (Fig. 2) with his portrait which occurs in the work, "De urinarum ac pulsuum judiciis Theophrasti Paracelsi



Fig. 2.

heremitæ utriusque medicinæ doctoris celeberrimi libellus," published at Cologne, 1568. In this plate the cross of the sword is clearly represented, and on the pommel is inscribed the word AZOTH. I think, therefore, that one is justified in regarding the object held by Paracelsus as being in all these cases a sword-handle.

But why should Paracelsus be represented holding a sword of such peculiar form, for two-handed swords were certainly not generally used in his time, even in Switzerland? ²⁰ Here again the writings of his bitterest enemies throw some light, seizing as they did on anything they could to interpret it in some way discreditable to him.

The following passages afford an explanation of the sword, and also possibly of the word AZOTH, when it is inscribed on the pommel; the quotations are from the work of Prof. Thomas Erastus against the Paracelsian doctrines, and are in the coarse, abusive method of attack so frequently made use of at the time:—

“Retulit²¹ hæc sæpe D. Oporinus,²² ἀξιοπιστώτατος, qui amanuensis ejus fuit per biennium. Idem affirmatè sæpè narravit, nunquam nisi benè potum ad mysteria sua explicanda accessisse: et in medio hypocausto columnæ τετυφωμένον, adeoque numine suo plenum assistentem, manibus capulo ensis comprehenso (quod ejus κοίλωμα hospitium præberet ei spiritui, qui vitro inclusus responsa fascinatis²³ à se hominibus dare solet), eructare suas imaginationes consuevisse. Superavit inconstantia, impudentia, temeritate, et prodigiosa impietate Arianos,

²⁰ Where their earlier use has been rendered so notorious by Sir Walter Scott's “Anne of Geierstein.”

²¹ Th. Erastus, *op. cit.*, pp. 236 and 237.

²² The same Oporinus, quoted as a witness in the extract already given. Cf. also Andreas Jociscus, *Oratio de ortu, vita, et obitu Johannis Oporini Basiliensis*. Argentorati, 1569, p. 9.

²³ Perhaps the shining glass pommel of his sword was used by Paracelsus to hypnotise patients. For a similar purpose modern hypnotists at Paris use a glittering revolving object, like the instruments used for fascinating larks. This may explain how Paracelsus cured epileptics (hystero-epileptics?) by “magic,” when other doctors failed; for which he is praised by Giordano Bruno.

Photinianos, Mahometanos, Haereticos, denique Tartareos omnes."

Another passage on p. 239 :—

"Plerumque enim non nisi ebrius, ad extremum noctem domum ibat cubitum, atque ita, ut erat indutus, adjuncto sibi gladio suo, quem Carnificis cujusdem fuisse jactabat, in stratum sese conjiciebat : ac sæpe media nocte surgens, per cubiculum nudo gladio ita insaniebat, ita crebris ictibus et pavementum et parietes impetebat ut ego non semel mihi caput iri amputatum metuerem."

It does not seem improbable that the peculiar two-handed sword was properly the sword of an executioner²⁴ (*carnifex*). Was the pommel of the sword really a knob of glass, containing, enclosed in it, some of the "spiritus" spoken of by Erastus, that is the *spiritus vitæ*, or *quinta essentia*,²⁵ giving the virtue to his medicine "azoth," so much talked of by the successors of Paracelsus?

This would afford an explanation for the inscription AZOTH occurring on the pommel of the sword in the

²⁴ That Paracelsus made the acquaintance of executioners is known, from the following passage quoted by Dr. M. B. Lessing, (*Paracelsus*, Berlin, 1839, p. 59): "I went in search of my art, often incurring danger of life. I have not been ashamed to learn that which seemed most useful to me even from vagabonds, executioners, and barbers. We know that a lover will go a long way to meet the woman he adores; how much more will the lover of wisdom be tempted to go in search of his divine mistress!" — Translation in Dr. Hartmann's *Life of Paracelsus*, London, 1887, p. 18.

²⁵ The *quinta essentia* was the chief *spiritus* of his mystic doctrine of medicine which was supposed to pervade all things in exceedingly small quantities. To this all minerals owed their virtues, and this living beings lost on their death. If it could be extracted and administered as a medicine it would give eternal life and freedom from diseases, *i.e.* would be the "panacea."

medal and the plate already referred to (Fig. 3). (See Melchior Adami in *Vitæ Germanorum Medicorum*, Heidelberg, 1620, p. 35: "Alii illud, quod in capulo habuit, ab ipso Azoth appellatum, medicinam fuisse præstantissimam aut lapidem philosophicum putant.")

The signification in the mystic symbolism of the time might then be, that just as the executioner's sword could destroy malefactors, so the wonderful "azoth" could overcome disease; and, indeed, this explanation is in keeping with the known doctrines of Paracelsus, who almost personified disease, regarding it as something essentially foreign to the organism which entered in to fight with it, and in this he dimly foreshadowed the modern "microbe" doctrine of many diseases.

The medals and portraits of Paracelsus seem to lend some countenance to the assertions of his enemies, who very likely made use of them to support their accusations; and a similar portrait of Paracelsus appears in the book containing the most violent attacks against his doctrines (Fig. 2).²⁶

How far these accusations are true is difficult to say, but the chief witness, Oporinus, was sorry for his conduct after the death of Paracelsus. It is unreasonable to suppose that Paracelsus was quite free from the prevailing superstitions of his time.²⁷ Arrogant he certainly was, possibly from the conviction of his own superiority over his contemporaries, but it remains certain that he made great

²⁶ Th. Erastus, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Thus alchemy and astrology constitute the chief part of two out of his four "columnæ" of medical science. See *Paragranum*—a book, however, whose authenticity is not altogether free from doubt.

advances in the practice of medicine. He encouraged the use of preparations of mercury, iron, arsenic, and antimony, as well as of tincture of opium,²⁸ all of which



Fig. 3.

have been found of great use in medicine; he wrote on

²⁸ Still known as laudanum, the name given to it by Paracelsus, if, indeed, what Paracelsus called "laudanum" was not quite a different preparation to the modern laudanum.

Pfaffers²⁹ and other baths³⁰ as health resorts; but, perhaps chief of all, he laid due stress on the tendency to spontaneous recovery from disease,³¹ the "*vis medicatrix naturæ*," representing the use of medicine as an ally to help man in battling against disease.

²⁹ See *Von dem Bad Pfeffers*, Strassburg, 1571, 8vo; with a preface by Dr. Michael Toxites.

³⁰ See *Badenfart Büchlein*, Franckfurt am Mayn, 1566, 8vo.

³¹ Of quite equal importance was his insistence on the natural process by which wounds heal.