

FRANCISCUS DELE BOË, SYLVIVS
1614-1672

Sylvius was born in Hanau (Germany) on 15 March 1614, the son of a merchant whose father had originally come from Cambrai (northern France) but had emigrated to Frankfurt am Main.¹ Sylvius got his primary education at the Calvinist Academy of Sedan. From 1633 to 1635 he studied medicine at Leiden under Adolph Vorstius and Otto Heurnius. Because he did not like their teaching he went to Wittenberg, Jena, and finally to Basel, where he took his doctorate in 1637. After practicing medicine for eighteen months in Hanau, Sylvius went to Leiden in 1638.

At Leiden, Sylvius obtained permission to give widely acclaimed private lectures in anatomy at the university, using Caspar Bartholinus's *Anatomicae Institutiones*. Apart from his anatomical demonstrations at the Gallery of the Botanical Garden, he also performed physiological experiments. Sylvius was one of the first adherents on the European Continent to William Harvey's theory of the circulation of the blood. One of his students was the later professor of medicine Johannes Walaeus (1604-1649).

In 1641 Sylvius began a medical practice in Amsterdam, where he became inspector of the Collegium Medicum in 1657. He was highly esteemed by his medical colleagues Nicolaas Tulp, Paulus Barbette and Hendrik van Roonhuijse. His scientific work consisted of *post mortem* examinations and chemical experiments. Sylvius's interest in chemistry brought him into contact with the chemists Otto Sperling and Jan Rudolph Glauber. In 1647 Sylvius married Anna de Ligne with whom he had two children (both died very young). In 1666 he married his second wife, Magdalena Lucretia Schletzer, who died three years after their marriage. Their daughter followed her mother to the grave one year later. Sylvius was a well-known collector of Dutch paintings and a patron of the painters Frans van Mieris the elder and Gerard Dou. At the time of his death Sylvius possessed 162 paintings.

The University of Leiden called Sylvius to a professorship of medicine in 1658. He delivered his inaugural oration on 16 September of that year *De hominis cognitione*. Sylvius was an excellent, enthusiastic teacher who attracted many students from all parts of Europe. As an

¹ Sylvius is the Latin translation of Dele Boë = du Bois.

experienced clinician he took his students daily to the Caecilia hospital where he practised bedside teaching and performed autopsies. In his therapeutics Sylvius preferred the new chemical medicines to the old ones. His knowledge of chemistry was recognised by the governors of the university in 1666, when he also became professor of chemistry.

In anatomy Sylvius made a number of discoveries, especially in the anatomy of the brain. Analogous to Harvey's theory of the blood circulation, Sylvius believed that there also existed a circulation of the *spiritus animales* that were generated in the brain. They were supposedly transported by the nerves, lymphatic vessels and the veins. Sylvius attached such importance to the role of the spleen in blood production that he became widely known as the *patronus lienis*. His medical theories were based on the iatrochemical principles of Paracelsus and Van Helmont. He was convinced that all physiological and pathological processes were analogous to reactions that could be observed in the chemical laboratory. In the body, too, acid and alkali were the fundamental principles. He attributed an important role to ferments, which led him to an experimental study of the function of the duodenum and to recognize the role of saliva in the digestive process.

In Sylvius iatrochemistry and chemiatry had their most influential advocate, but near the end of his career he met with serious opposition, especially from his Groningen colleague Anton Deusing who disliked Sylvius's often speculative theories. Sylvius's impassioned lectures inspired many of his students such as Jan Swammerdam, Nicolaus Steno, and Reinier de Graaf. Sylvius died on 15 November 1672 and was succeeded by Charles Drélincourt (1633-1697) who was a staunch critic of his predecessor's ideas.

Primary works

Poggendorff, vol. 2, 1061-1062. A not fully complete list of Sylvius's works is to be found in Baumann, *Sylvius* (see below). His inaugural oration of 1658 is reprinted with an introduction and a Dutch translation in *Opuscula selecta Neerlandicorum de arte medica*, vol. 6 (Amsterdam: Nederlandsch Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde, 1927) 2-45. See on the inventory of his paintings E.J. Sluijter, 'Schilders van "cleyne, subtile ende curieuse dingen". Leidse "fijnschilders" in contempo-

raïne bronnen', in: E.J. Sluijter et al., eds, *Leidse fijnschilders van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge 1630-1760* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1988) 37, 52, note 187.

Secondary sources

E.D. Baumann, *François dele Boë Sylvius* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1949); G.E. Dann, 'Beitrag zur Biographie und Familiengeschichte des Leidener Professors Franz de le Boë Sylvius', in: *Vorträge der Hauptversammlung der Internationalen Gesellschaft für Geschichte der Pharmazie* (Stuttgart: Wissenschaftliche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1965) 29-46; A. Gubser, 'The *Positiones variae medicae* of Franciscus Sylvius', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 40 (1966) 72-80; L.S. King, *The road to medical enlightenment* (London: MacDonald; New York: American Elsevier/Neale Watson, 1970) 93-112; E.A. Underwood, 'Franciscus Sylvius and his iatrochemical school', *Endeavour* 31 (1972) 73-176; G.A. Lindeboom, *De geschiedenis van de medische wetenschap in Nederland* (Bussum: Fibula-Van Dishoeck, 1972) 91-93; H. Beukers, 'Het laboratorium van Sylvius', *TGGNWT* 3 (1980) 28-36; *idem*, 'Mechanistische principes bij Franciscus dele Boë, Sylvius', *TGGNWT* 5 (1982) 6-15; H. Leich, *Franciscus Sylvius' Lehre von den Schärffen* (s.l., s.n., 1993; dissertation University of Tübingen).
DMB, 1939-1943; G.A. Lindeboom, in: *DSB*, vol. 13, 222-223; E.D. Baumann, in: *NNBW*, vol. 8, 1290-1294.

[L.C.P.]