

## THE MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE OF VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

The museum of medicine of Vilnius university is one of the unique museums devoted to the issues of medicine in Lithuania. It was created out of the clinical practice by Vilnius university physicians. Early museum served as a curiosity cabinet as well as a teaching museum. After the closure of Vilnius university in the mid of 19th century the museum was destroyed by Tsar's government. In the early 20th century museum was reestablished by the Polish government. The modern collections were added with craniological and osteological specimens as well as pathology exhibition. The contemporary museum was created in the last decade of 20th century. In the last period museum serves both academic and public interest. Museum includes inter-war, soviet exhibits and collection of medical books.

**Keywords:** *Vilnius University; museum; history; exhibits*

### THE ORIGIN OF THE MEDICAL MUSEUM OF THE VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

The medical museums of Vilnius University have a long and treasured history dating back to the end of the 18th century. The first museum was that of anatomy founded by the French anatomist and surgeon professor Jacques Briotet (1746–1819) in 1777. It contained both normal and pathological anatomy specimens and pre-dated the formal establishment of the Medical Faculty (Collegium Medicum) in 1781. The museum was born out of the clinical practice since the professor's wife served as a midwife in local clinics. Academic museum expositions soon attracted flocks of citizens and guests of the city



**Figure 1.** Dry anatomical specimens from A. Bielkiewicz collection, early 19th century. Photo by Irma Kušeliauskaitė.

as one of the biggest in the region. The collections grew and flourished in the beginning of the 19th century and were among the finest in Europe. Owing to head of the museum Adam Bielkiewicz (1797–1840) the museum grew up to ~ 3000 preparations (Fig. 1), the collections were classified into bone, normal and pathological collections and kept the premises of the Anatomicum built in 1815 (1).

In 1832 Tsar Nicholas I closed the University. The Medical Faculty became the Imperial Vilnius Academy of Medicine and Surgery and existed until 1842. Most of the museum collection were taken apart and moved to Kiev. After the Imperial Vilnius Academy of Medicine and Surgery was closed, the Vilnius Medical Society took over what remained of the collections and began to rebuild them. But the collection could not match the old ones in it's numbers and variety (1).

## **THE MUSEUM UNDER THE STEPHEN BATHORY UNIVERSITY**

When Lithuania regained its independence in 1918, the first Lithuanian provisional government attempted to re-establish Vilnius University but failed

because Vilnius and its surrounding regions were occupied by Józef Piłsudski's Polish Army in 1919. On 28 August 1919, Piłsudski signed the decree re-establishing Vilnius University under the Polish government as a Stephen Bathory University (1919–1939) (2).

In spring 1920 the Polish anthropologist J. Talko-Hrynecicz established the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology and the Museum in the Faculty of Medicine. The first exhibition consisted from the skulls which had been found in the churches of Vilnius and in other places around (3). During the summer of 1920 the first skulls has been collected in Vilnius and Smorgonys. Later the majority of them has been taken to the Department of Anatomy. It was the beginning of the huge collection of skulls. The most valuable part of the collection – the trepanned skulls. The skulls lie in the Department of Anatomy in Vilnius, one of them can be also found in Kaunas, Museum of the History of Lithuania Medicine and Pharmacy (4).

The later collection developed from the practical needs of a Vilnius city. The city has been expanding, a lot of craniological and osteological material were found during the excavations and taken to the Anatomy Department by prof. Michał Reicher (1888–1973). There are a lot of short messages in a local press about the skulls or skeletons found in different places in Vilnius, which match the notes in the inventory book of the Anatomy Department by date and place (5). The skulls were also used during the workshops of medical students (6). A good state of the skulls shows that the collection has been formed selectively – the better skulls has been collected and the rest probably were taken to some other places.

Among the other skulls and skeletons, the remains of Lithuanian-Polish noble Barbora Radvilaitė, Elżbieta Habsburgaitė and Aleksandras Jogailaitis were found. In the inventory book we can see some notes about the moulds made from the sacrum and other bones of these noble men (5).

In 1924 Vilnius Medical Society pathologic anatomy preparations were donated to the Pathological Anatomy Department of Stephen Batory University. Lecturer S. Mahrburg constantly added to a collection of pathologic anatomy new preparations. In a year 1931–1932 he has made 70 new preparations. Till the years of the World War II the collection contained about 800 preparations in gelatin and formalin (1).

After the death of Józef Piłsudski (1935) his brain has been examined in Vilnius Brain Research institute and the conclusions of the research were published in 1938 by neurology professor Maximilian Rose (7). There is a unique copy of the album of Piłsudski's brain (Fig. 2) and M. Rose's book "Mózg



Figure 2. M. Rose's book "Mózg Józefa Piłsudskiego" and the album of Piłsudski's brain. Photo by Liudvikas Vilimas.

Józefa Piłsudskiego" (The Brain of Joseph Piłsudski) kept in the Museum of the History of Medicine. It is among very few such books in Poland. Piłsudski himself was buried in the Wawel cathedral (Poland), his heart was buried in Vilnius, but little people knows that his brain is not in Wawel with his body. The brain was lost during the World War II (8).

## THE PERIOD FROM 1944 TO THE LAST DECADE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

In 1939 the former Stephen Bathory university was reorganized (6). In 1940 Lithuania fell under the first soviet occupation. Later, during the Nazi occupation times the University was closed down. The birth of the current museum is related to scientists from the Department of Anatomy, Histology and Anthropology, as well as scientists from the Departments of Pathological Anatomy, Forensic Medicine and Pharmacology. After the second soviet occupation (1944) of Lithuania the Faculty of Medicine was completely reorganized (1). Former anatomy professor Michał Reicher moved to Poland and left the skull collections and most of the other exhibits to the new anatomy department (6). Pathology professor Ruvinas Ptašekas and Dr. Albertas Žygas prepared about 100 new pathology exhibits (1).

At about the year 1947 archaeologists started to carry forward skulls and bones to the Medical Faculty from all Lithuania. The collection of skulls was added with new exhibits (8000 specimens) due to the scientific archeological

expeditions in all parts of Lithuania. Now all the human archeological materials are taken to the Medical Faculty and medical reports are integrate into archeological reports. Presently the Department is keeping about 10 000 units – from the very fragmentary to the full skeletons.

In 1981 by order of the Dean, Prof. Salezijus Pavilionis, a scientist from the Department of Anatomy, Histology and Anthropology, Dr. Antanas Adomaitis, went to Kiev and acquired the collection of 42 dry exhibits from the Kiev Anatomy Institute (1). As we have mentioned before, 140 years ago most of our exhibits ware taken to Kiev. It included samples of foots, legs, arm muscles, veins and nerves, some samples of lungs, urinary system, foetuses and placentas as well as facial vein and nerve samples.

## **THE CONTEMPORARY MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE**

The modern museum was reestablished only in late 20th century by dr. Aurimas Andriušis and Silvija Stakulienė. On May 17th, 1989 the Museum-Archive of the History of Medicine was established at Vilnius University, the Faculty of Medicine. Later (1998) it was reorganized as the Museum of the History of Medicine. In 1999 the Museum was registered as a departmental institution at the Ministry of Culture. In 2000 the Museum became a member of the Lithuanian Museums Association and the Association of European Museums of History of Medicine (9).

The museum has an exhibition of surgical and other medical instruments and equipment of various purposes and different historical periods; personal collections of professors and lectures of Vilnius University, the Faculty of Medicine; photoiconografic material; drug collections etc.

A mobile educational exhibition “Dissemination of Medical Science at the Old Vilnius University in 1781–1842” is on display at the Museum. The mentioned exhibition serves both public and academic needs since it’s one of the best ready-made conspectus of the Faculty’s History which is almost every time used by our students at the exam day (Fig. 3).

One of the oldest museum’s exhibits is Philip’s Verheyen’s (1648–1710) anatomy book “*Corporis humani anatomia*” published in 1699 in Leipzig. The book resembles the late renaissance manner of anatomy depictions similar to the Andrea Vesalius (1514–1564) tradition (Fig. 4).

Among other interesting exhibits we can also mention a microtome that was made almost 100 years ago in 1912, but already could make sections of 1 micrometer. In 2010 a medicine student, M. Jurkonis, gave the museum an

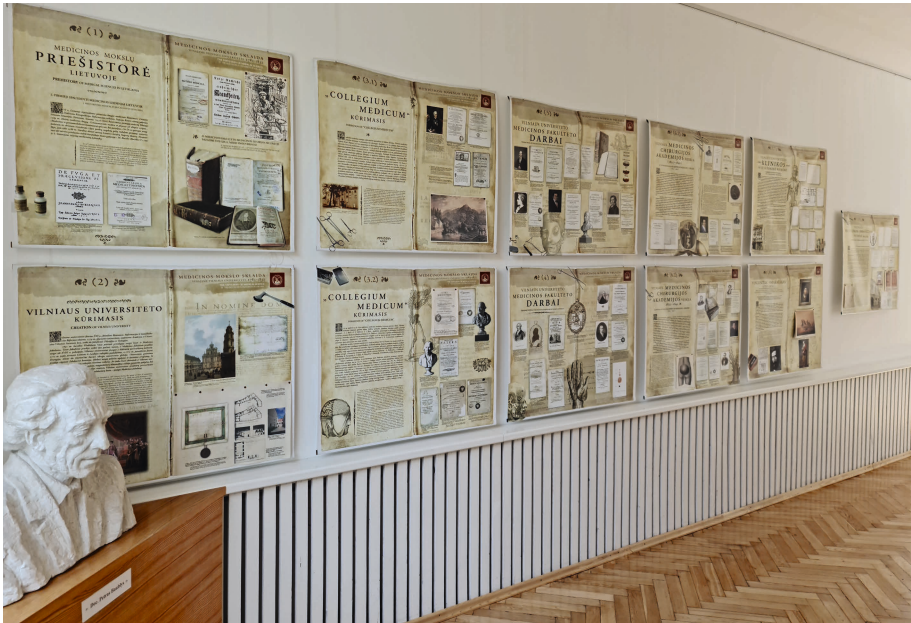


Figure 3. A mobile educational exhibition “Dissemination of Medical Science at the Old Vilnius University in 1781–1842”. Photo by Liudvikas Vilimas.

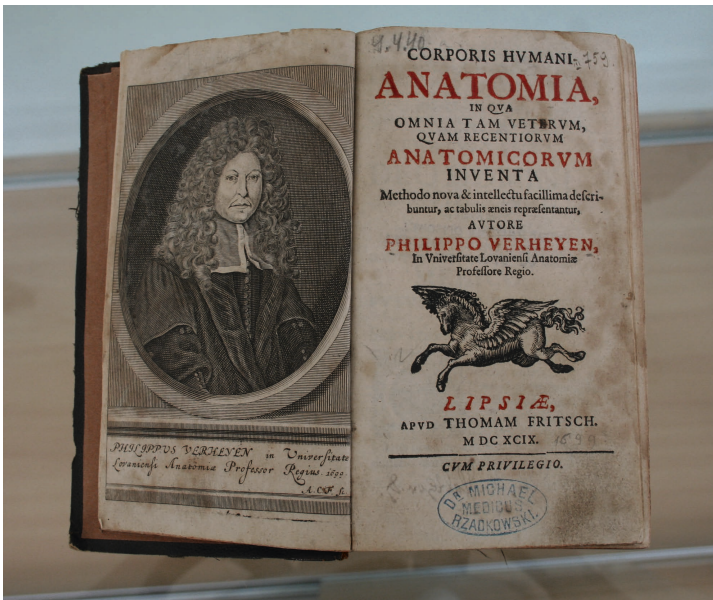


Figure 4. Philip Verheyven “Corporis humani anatomia” (1699). Photo by Irma Kušeliauskaitė.



**Figure 5.** Wax sculpture composition "A Barber-Surgeon Guild". Photo by Irma Kušeliauskaitė.

impressive wax sculpture composition he made himself “A Barber-Surgeon Guild”. This composition is a reconstruction of a workshop of a 16th century surgeon-barber (Fig. 5).

Another interesting and unique exhibit is a probe made of its own construction from the plastic sheath of the telephone cord. In 1956 for diagnostic purposes, the first cardiac probe was performed in Lithuania for a patient with congenital heart disease. This original probe actually served very well for its purpose.

The museum also stores some dentistry exposition. The original foot power drill similar with the drill once constructed by John Greenwood (1760–1819) is an artefact of Soviet dentistry. Because of the belated electrification in USSR the foot power dental drill was one of the possible solutions to supply the dental cabinets of that period.

A very recent exhibition in our museum is Dental prostheses which were found in the 19th century landowners’ Kauneckai family crypt near the church in Kaunatava village (Lithuania) a few years ago. While handling the crypt, dentures (Fig. 6) were found in one of the coffins near the woman’s remains. Metal prosthesis plates and springs are made of high fineness gold alloys, teeth are made of porcelain.

In conclusion, the Museum of the History of medicine of Vilnius University is an integral part of the rich and changeable history of our University. We believe that our museum will keep with its duties in a future as an heir of its historical rights. Nevertheless, there are some challenges that almost every university museum faces every day. Most of them are related with the worries of everyday life such as the place of museums, heritage and culture in general in our changing modern life. However, we believe that unique collection of our museum that includes over 10 000 skulls and skeletons as well as many other normal and pathological anatomy exhibits makes our museum one of the biggest in this region that encourages us to continue the works which are being started before.



**Figure 6.** Dentures from Kauneckai family crypt, 19th century. Photo by Aistė Jučaitė.



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