

## A letter from Giovanni Rosini on the plagiarism of Paolo Mascagni's anatomical tables

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**Abstract.** The primary sources are precious testimony for the most objective possible reconstruction of historical facts. Therefore, they play a fundamental role in clarifying disputes and controversies. Debated aspects are quite frequent in the scientific field, as far as the attribution or priority of discoveries and publications is concerned. An important dispute arose in the first half of the 19th century, regarding the intriguing question of the plagiarism of the posthumous work *Anatomia Universa* of the famous Tuscan anatomist Paolo Mascagni (1755-1815) by his dissector Francesco Antommarchi (1780-1838). A contribution to the clarification of this controversy is provided by the discovery of an unpublished epistolary document which is now transcribed and commented in this article. It is a letter written in Pisa on 14 June 1823 by Giovanni Rosini (1776-1855), a friend and colleague of Mascagni, and addressed to the French bookseller and bibliographer Antoine-Augustin Renouard (1765-1853). Rosini was one of the three curators of the posthumous work, together with Andrea Vaccà-Berlinghieri (1772-1826) and Giacomo Barzellotti (1768-1839), and he soon worked to defend Mascagni from the plagiarism of Antommarchi. This epistolary document demonstrates and confirms that Rosini tried to denounce and hinder the incorrect behavior of Mascagni's pupil.

**Key words:** Paolo Mascagni, Giovanni Rosini, Francesco Antommarchi, *Anatomia Universa*, copyright



## Introduction

In the history of human anatomy, one of the most important published works is undoubtedly represented by *Anatomia Universa* [Universal Anatomy] (1-3), a 1:1 scale atlas of anatomy by the Tuscan scientist Paolo Mascagni (1755-1815) (Figure 1). Mascagni was an important researcher, and it is estimated that much of the lymphatic system was illustrated by him. His innovative injection techniques for the preparation of anatomical samples allowed us to observe otherwise



**Figure 1.** Plaster bust of Paolo Mascagni. Mascagni's Gallery of the Museum of Human Anatomy "Filippo Civinini" of the University of Pisa.

unprovable details at that time (4). This method also had notable implications outside the field of research. Mascagni always proved to be very attentive to teaching and used his techniques to improve the precision of anatomical representation. Thus, he allowed us to understand the anatomical discipline even for those who did not have a body to dissect (5, 6).

After the publication of his famous research on lymphatic vessels (7) and of an integrated and cheaper edition (8), Mascagni had planned to publish a masterpiece of human anatomy which would also contain a description of this new vascular system. The project was long and complex. In 1807 the chair of anatomy was established in Florence at the Academy of Fine Arts, where Mascagni was invited to teach. Therefore, Mascagni also planned a work dedicated to artists. Neither of these two major projects was completed before the anatomist's death in 1815.

For the creation of figures and engravings on copper plates, Mascagni worked above all with the drawer Antonio Serantoni (1780-1837) (9). For anatomical studies, however, he had the collaboration of three dissectors: Tommaso Bonicoli (1746-1802), Filippo Uccelli (1770-1843), and Francesco Antommarchi (1780-1838). He had great trust and esteem for the latter, but it was Antommarchi himself who published his master's tables posthumously without clear authorization.

The unpublished epistolary document, which now is transcribed and commented on this article, clearly refers to the age-old and complex question of the plagiarism of Mascagni's *Anatomia Universa* by his dissector Antommarchi. In its general lines, the topic was treated by Ferri (10) and part of her text is referred to here.

### The intellectual heritage of Mascagni: The posthumous works

The first posthumous work to be published was *Anatomia per uso degli studiosi di scultura e pittura* [Anatomy for scholars of sculpture and painting] (11), edited and paid for by his brother Bernardino and his nephew Aurelio. The scientific part, however, was handled by Antommarchi.

Upon the death of Mascagni's brother, to guarantee the posthumous publication of the immense scientific heritage, Bernardino's widow decided to set up an anonymous company whose economic management was called Antonio Maggi and Antommarchi to the scientific management. Therefore, the trust that Mascagni had placed in his student also continued among the anatomist's family. In 1819 the *Prodromo della grande anotomia* [Introduction to the great anatomy] was published (12), also including a second iconographic volume with 20 plates drawn and engraved by Serantoni (13). Although it was of great value, the work was inconvenient and impractical to consult. The subtitle clearly states that it is Mascagni's second posthumous work, published by Antommarchi. The latter, however, was not present at the time of publication, because in the meantime he was called as a doctor to Saint Helena to assist Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821). Both had the land of origin in common. In fact, both Antommarchi and the exiled emperor were born in Corsica. From the *Lettre des héritiers* [Letter of heirs] (14), written on 30 June 1823 by Mascagni's sister-in-law and addressed to the Count of Lasteyrie, we know that Antommarchi brought with him some manuscripts and two copies of part of the plates of the *Grande Anatomia* [Great Anatomy], already printed by Mascagni. There were still about ten plates missing which would have depicted the skeleton and some organs. In Antommarchi's intentions, this operation was functional to promote the complete work in an international context.

From the publication of the *Prodromo della grande anotomia* (12), another pupil of Mascagni, Gianbattista Bellini, drew information to publish his second edition of the *Istoria dei vasi linfatici* [History of lymphatic vessels] (15), an Italian translation of the monumental masterpiece by Mascagni (7).

In 1821 a second edition of the *Prodromo della Grande Anatomia* was published, edited and illustrated this time by Tommaso Farnese (1780-1829), in two volumes (16). The text is accompanied by two volumes of illustrations copied by Giacomo Frey, Antonio Bernieri and others from the original plates by Serantoni (17).

As reported in the *Lettre des héritiers* (14), the sale of the *Prodromo* edited by Antommarchi was

unsuccessful. Thus, director Maggi proposed changes to the contract of the anonymous company, but in Saint Helena Antommarchi replied that he wanted to dissolve the company, to have the ten missing panels and to pay Mascagni's heirs with the texts of the *Prodromo* which remained unsold and not with the agreed 6,500 francs. Upon his return to Florence, Antommarchi did not see his proposal accepted and having obtained the dissolution of the company from the Florentine court in April 1822, he broke off all relations with Mascagni's heirs.

Due to this profound misunderstanding, two distinct stories developed from that moment, as both Mascagni's heirs and Antommarchi proceeded independently with the publication of the anatomist's posthumous work.

Mascagni's heirs sold all the material in their possession (texts, drawings and copperplates) to three Pisan professors, friends of the anatomist: Andrea Vaccà-Berlinghieri (1772-1826), Giacomo Barzellotti (1768-1839), and Giovanni Rosini (1776-1855). In fact, they oversaw the translation of the work into Latin, performed by the Siense Eugenio Stanislao Grottanelli de' Santi (1788-1874), and its publication. As a tradition, when an important publication is planned, the editors gave notice of it in advance and a notice appeared in the *Biblioteca Italiana*, the newsletter published in Milan from 1816 to 1840, which brought together the best of Italian literary and intellectual production, playing an important role in cultural debate of the first Risorgimento. In the presentation of the work to the press, details were provided on its characteristics: nine installments, with annual release, list of bookstores for purchase and conditions of sale (18). Since part of the textual material had been taken away by Antommarchi, the curators turned to Gerolamo Grifoni, who was Mascagni's assistant for seven years, to verify some anatomical details directly on the corpse. Furthermore, five special tables were also created. As expected, the monumental work of *Anatomia Universa* took about ten years to be published in its entirety (19). It also included a volume of 44 anatomical tables and 44 counter-tables (20). It was above all the iconographic part that made the work extraordinary. In the meantime, Vaccà-Berlinghieri died, and he was replaced by Filippo De Commun who also took charge

of the conservation of the copper plates. A couple of years later, Serantoni, who had supervised and coordinated the creation of the illustrations, published a cheaper edition of the work, with smaller plates (21).

Precisely in the year in which the publication of the work by Mascagni's heirs was announced and the first issue was being prepared, news arrived from France of a similar initiative by Antommarchi. The latter, in fact, recalling that he had also edited the *Prodromo* (12), announced in the same way the creation of a great posthumous anatomical work by Mascagni. It was no coincidence that the publication was announced in France in the *Revue Encyclopédique* (22). Antommarchi, in fact, as Napoleon's doctor in Saint Helena, had already worked on the tables there and made the exiled emperor aware of the importance of anatomical work. Furthermore, a Napoleonic general had brought news of a new printing method created in Bavaria, named lithography, which allowed illustrations to be obtained more quickly and at lower costs. Therefore, as soon as he returned to Europe, Antommarchi went to Paris to the lithographic printing press of the Count of Lasteyrie, to have the anatomical tables engraved. For the French texts, he exploited Mascagni's notes, turning to the publisher Dondey-Dupré.

Of course, this news created great alarm among Mascagni's heirs. Among the first to move was Grottanelli de' Santi who, copy in hand of the first color issue already published, toured throughout Italy and Europe to promote the Pisan edition. When he arrived in Paris, he could not help but denounce what was happening, accusing Antommarchi of plagiarism. The French academics, however, did not give much importance to that warning. In fact, the work edited by Antommarchi was released between 1823 and 1826. It therefore began together with the Pisan one but ended five years earlier. This work was organized into a text (23) and into tables and counter-tables (24), as well. The iconographic part was of particular interest, since it was created with the new printing technique. Lithography certainly had the advantage of greater speed and lower cost, but it was of lower quality than the classic etching of the Pisan edition. The line is smudged, and the chiaroscuro is less evident. Furthermore, the figures were those created by Serantoni which, with the new technique, also appeared upside down. As mentioned

previously, Antommarchi did not possess all the plates on the skeleton. Since his work was completed in 1826 and the eighth installment of the Pisan edition which contained the plates with the skeleton came out only in 1830, Antommarchi was unable to copy them and, most likely, created them *ex novo*, inspired by *Anatomia per uso degli studiosi di scultura e pittura* (11) of which he had been curator.

The last years of Antommarchi's life were equally adventurous. He first moved to Poland, returned to France, and finally he went to America, to the United States and Cuba. He met a Colombian woman with whom he fell in love. After his death, his widow returned to Colombia bringing with her the lithographed anatomical tables, bequeathed to her nephew. After graduating in medicine, this nephew donated the plates to the central library of the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia*, where they are still preserved (25).

### **Mascagni, intellectual properties and disputes in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature**

Immediately after Mascagni's death, two disputes arose on his discoveries, which today we could define as cases of dispute for the attribution of intellectual property.

The lesser-known case concerns the discovery of the vascular anatomy of the urethra, which pitted against Alessandro Moreschi and Mascagni's pupils, including Farnese and Antommarchi. The latter wanted recognition of the scientific paternity of their master even though Mascagni had not published his research, which was instead done by Moreschi (26). In the publications in which Antommarchi and Farnese defended the memory of Mascagni from Moreschi's attacks, the character of the French doctor and his way of operating once again emerge. In fact, Antommarchi published the *Osservazioni* [Observations] (27) not only to oppose Moreschi, but also to claim his status as the only true cultural heir of Mascagni, threatened by the publication of the *Elogio* [Eulogy] by Farnese (28). Farnese responded, in turn, with the publication of *Note addizionali* [Additional Notes] (29).

The best-known case concerns the posthumous publication of *Anatomia Universa* (10), whose most

complete and precise description written by Mascagni's contemporaries is probably the one published by his friend Rosini in 1831, reconstructing the whole story with rich documentation. He was a man of letters, professor of eloquence at the University of Pisa from 1804. He left a vast production of poems and historical novels. Therefore, it is not surprising to find within the new edition of his *Rime e prose* [Rhymes and prose works] (30) an entire *Appendice* [Appendix] chapter (*Risposta a quanto fu scritto nella Biografia dei contemporanei stampata a Parigi, sulla Grande Anatomia del Mascagni. tom. XIII. pag. 30.* [Response to what was written in the Biography of contemporaries printed in Paris, on the Great Anatomy of Mascagni. tom. XIII. pag. 30.]), in which the author expressed his disappointment for Antommarchi's plagiarism.

### Rosini's letter

In historical reconstructions, primary sources represent very precious testimony and contribute to completing the mosaic of facts in the most objective way possible.

The epistolary document reported below is published for the first time (Figure 2). It is a letter written in Pisa on 14 June 1823 by Giovanni Rosini, sent from Pisa on 23 June 1823 (as evidenced by the postmark) to Antoine-Augustin Renouard (1765-1853), a French bookseller and bibliographer, and arrived in Paris on the 28th of the same month, as indicated by one of the stamps affixed. The recipient's address indicated is Rue de La Harpe, a Parisian Street in the Latin Quarter. The letter is owned by a private Italian collector (Lorenzo Gremigni Francini). It was purchased on the antique market as a pre-philatelic document of postal history of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany (n. 218/11). As coauthor of this article, Gremigni Francini granted permission for its publication.

Here are the transcript and English translation:

*Paris. Mr. Ant. Aug. Renouard*

*Pisa 14 June 1823*

*At the time I received your first letter regarding Mascagni's octavo; and I now receive the second letter of the 28th. We were in one another's mistakes: you were waiting for our letters, and we were waiting for a letter*

*from your son, which you had announced to us, after he had spoken to Minister Karcher.*

*Since this has happened, we have told you what our plan is.*

I.°

*We want to sell you, under the conditions that you will like to propose, both for debiter on our behalf, the entire part of the viscera, which forms 15 planches, i.e. 3 of our livraisons of the great anatomy; therefore, you must immediately make 4 or 5 copies and make the announced depot that are sold; the captions will be given separately (since they have not yet been done) and will be printed by Didot Firmin, in its 14 font which is the one we use. You see that behind the property laws you become the owner, since you retry the planches de cuivre, and that le tirage is done in France. Thus, Antommarchi and Lasterie will not be able to litographier the viscera in France. To be able to weigh the pros and cons, let us know:*

*How much does le tirage cost in the grand'aigle paper.*

*How much is the miniature of a Head similar to the one in the Prospectus.*

*What is the price of white grand'aigle paper, tissue-paper, but not super fine.*

*We will send you the captions, and you will print them. In addition to these 15 planches of the viscera (of which 3 are unpublished), we also have unpublished 6 Plates of Bones, and 1 of details. You see, Antommarchi would be missing about half of the work.*

2.°

*Instead of attacking him in court, we will shortly send you a written document, accompanied by all the documents, which will be deposited in original with S. C. Karcher. You and your son will realize what you can legally do. Antommarchi was a dissequeur of Mascagni for only 3 academic years, and nothing else, that is, from 1812 to 1815, the time of Mascagni's death. There is evidence from the chancellery: so I ask you whether this gives him the right to appropriate the work of that great man? Furthermore, there is his confession in a letter – but you will see this in an advanced state when you read the memoir.*

*In the meantime, tell us what the amount of bail to be given as a foreigner – and would it not be better to go to the Trade Court?*

*I have not sent you nor am I sending you Tommasini's Physiology, because the work can no longer be found. It was*



Figure 2. One side of Giovanni Rosini's letter (1823). With permission of Lorenzo Gremigni Francini.

published in Parma 20 years ago, in 3 large volumes (and not finished). The Author has now changed his opinion and repudiated his work.

Please, tell me honestly what you think of this work by Antommarchi, Mascagni, the Lithographic Plates etc. – If I am not mistaken, the colorful ones compared to our Head seem to me to resemble the cards of the Iroquois, where men are painted. Goodbye. Greet the sons and Madame Renouard.

Rosini

Here is the original transcript:

Parigi. Sig. Ant. Aug. Renouard

Pisa 14 Giugno 1823

Ricevei a suo tempo la prima vostra riguardante l'ottava Mascagni; e ricevo ora la seconda del 28 passato. Noi eravamo l'un l'altro in errore: voi attendevate nostre lettere, e noi attendevamo lettera dal vostro Figlio, che ci aveva annunziata, dopo ch'egli avesse parlato col Ministro Karcher.

Poichè per altro la cosa è andata così, noi vi diciamo qual è il nostro piano.

I.°

Parigi. Sig. Ant. Aug. Renouard  
Pisa 14 Giugno 1823

Ricevei a suo tempo la prima vostra riguardante l'ottava Mascagni; e ricevo ora la seconda del 28 passato. – Noi eravamo l'un l'altro in errore: voi attendevate nostre lettere, e noi attendevamo lettera dal vostro Figlio, che ci aveva annunziata, dopo ch'egli avesse parlato col Ministro Karcher.

Poichè per altro la cosa è andata così, noi vi diciamo qual è il nostro piano.

I.°  
Siamo intenzionati a cedere a Voi, alle condizioni che vi piacerà di proporre, sia per accollarvi, sia per debitare per nostro conto, tutta la Parte dei Visceri, che forma 15 planches, o sia 3 delle nostre livraisons della grande Anatomia; sicché l'effetto segua, che subito ne facciate tirare 4, o 5 copie, ne facciate le depot annunziate che si vendono; e che le spiegazioni si daranno a parte (giacchè non son fatte ancora) e si stamperanno dal Didot Firmin, nel suo carattere 14. ch'è quello, che da noi si adopra. Voi vedete, che dietro le leggi di proprietà, essendo voi ritenute des planches de cuivre, e facendosi in Francia le tirage, ne divenite il proprietario. Così l'Antommarchi e Lasterie non potranno in Francia lithographier i visceri.

Per porci in grado poi di fare i nostri calcoli, fateci la grazia di dire:

Quanto costa le tirage nella carta grand'aigle.

Quanto la miniatura d'una Testa simile a quella ch'è nel Prospetto.

Quale è il prezzo della carta grand'aigle bianca, vellina, ma non sopraffina.

Noi vi manderemo le spiegazioni fatte, e voi le fareste stampare. Siccome, oltre queste 15 planches dei visceri (di cui 3 sono inedite) abbiamo anco inedite 6 Tavole di Ossa,

e I di dettagli. Voi vedete, che all'Antommarchi mancher-ebbe circa la metà dell'opera.

2.°

Rispetto ad attaccarlo in giudizio, noi vi faremo avere in breve uno scritto, accompagnato da tutti i documenti, che saranno depositati originali costà presso S. C. Karcher. Vostro figlio e voi vedrete quello che legalmente può farsi. Antommarchi è stato per soli 3 anni accademici dissequeur di Mascagni, e non altro, cioè dal 1812 al 1815, epoca della morte di Mascagni. Ci sono le prove estratte della cancelleria giacché: sicchè vi dimando se ciò gli dà il diritto d'appropriarsi il lavoro di quel grand'uomo? di più, ci è la confessione sua propria in una lettera – ma ciò vedrete maturamente alla lettura della memoria. –

Diteci intanto qual sarebbe l'ammontare della cauzione da darsi come forestieri – e se non sarebbe meglio andare al Tribunal di Commercio? –

Non vi ho mandato nè vi mando la *Fisiologia* di Tommasini, perchè è opera, che più non si trova. Fu pubblicata in Parma 20 anni fa, in 3 grossi tomi (e non compiuta). L'Autore adesso ha cambiato opinione e [ri]pudiata quella sua opera. –

[Vi] prego poi di dirmi sinceramente che cosa si pensa costà di quest'opera dell'Antommarchi, di Mascagni, delle *Tavole Litografiche* ecc. – Quelle colorite in paragone alla nostra Testa, se non m'inganno parmi che somiglino le carte degl'Irrocchesi, ove dipingono gli uomini. – Addio. Salutate i figli e madama Renouard. –

Rosini

## Comments and conclusions

The text of the letter is in Italian, but many French words also appear underlined with a continuous or dotted line (some not orthographically correct and with small deletions), suggesting that Rosini did not know those terms, as if Rosini wanted to make it easier for the recipient to read. Some Italian words are also underlined, to certainly highlight their importance.

As mentioned, the sender of the letter, Giovanni Rosini, was one of the three editors of *Anatomia Universa* (19), together with Vaccà-Berlinghieri and Barzellotti. With Renouard's help, he immediately tried to obtain some plates to be printed by the French engraver Didot Firmin. In this way, the Pisan

edition would immediately have priority in the legal ownership of the work. Thus, he confided in the plates that were still missing from Antommarchi, a delay that would have worked in favor of the Pisan curators. He also hoped for legal action, considering that Antommarchi did not have all the academic requirements to undertake that publication.

Before concluding the letter, Rosini also communicated some personal news and referred to the loan of Prof. Giacomo Tommasini's *Lezioni critiche di Fisiologia e Patologia* [Critical Lectures on Physiology and Pathology].

Finally, again he focused the attention on the issue of plagiarism, ultimately asking for an overall opinion on the matter. He also joked about the quality of the coloring of Antommarchi's plates, compared to that of the American primitives.

Antommarchi never enjoyed a good reputation, not even as a doctor (5, 10), but according to Dumaitre (31) his figure does not deserve such negative criticism.

This epistolary document demonstrates that, in addition to Grottanelli de' Santi, since 1823 Rosini also worked to denounce the actions of Antommarchi, which were judged incorrectly. In fact, Antommarchi's initiative dates to 1823 and Rosini tried to prevent further developments.

## Biography of cited figures

Apart from Paolo Mascagni, Giovanni Rosini and Francesco Antommarchi, who are the main figures described in the article, other figures mentioned in the article are outlined in this paragraph with short biographies.

**Giacomo Barzellotti** (1768-1839) was a student of the anatomist Paolo Mascagni at the University of Siena. After graduating in medicine in 1792, he practiced medicine until 1800, when he was appointed professor of surgical institutions in Siena. In 1810, he became professor of forensic medicine at the University of Pisa. He is considered a pioneer of forensic medicine in Italy. He was also interested in infectious diseases, especially their prevention, social medicine, and the history of medicine. He credited Andrea Cesalpino with the discovery of blood circulation.

**Alessandro Moreschi** (1771-1826) was an Italian anatomist. He taught anatomy at the University of Bologna. Besides the dispute on the vascularization of the urethra, he was also interested in vaccination and in 1801 published *Avviso al pubblico sull'antidoto, ossia preservativo del Vajuolo*. He purchased several works by Clemente Michelangelo Susini between 1803 and 1813, especially models of organs and systems such as the circulatory and peripheral nervous systems.

**Giacomo Tommasini** (1768-1846) graduated in 1789 in Parma, where he held the chair of physiology and pathology in 1794. In 1816, he moved to Bologna to teach clinical medicine. In 1823, he was honorary physician to Archduchess Maria Luisa of Parma. He affirmed the need to adopt the experimental method in medical practice.

**Andrea Vaccà Berlinghieri** (1772-1826) was a surgeon born in the Tuscan village of Montefoscoli. His father, Francesco Vacca Berlinghieri, was also a famous physician and writer of medical texts. In 1787 he travelled with his brother to study medicine in Paris, where he was a pupil to surgeon Pierre-Joseph Desault and obstetrician Jean-Louis Baudelocque. Two years later, he visited London, being interested in the surgical work of John Hunter. Following his return to Italy, he graduated in medicine and surgery at the University of Pisa, where he became professor of surgery. Vaccà Berlinghieri was the first surgeon in Italy to perform Hunter's procedure for aneurysms of the popliteal fossa and he improved surgical techniques for the treatment of renal stones.

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