Historia Anatomica Inventionis

The history of Anatomical Discovery via Graverobbing

Seen as polluting forces, dissection of corpses carried heavy taboo in Early European societies like Ancient Greece.

Despite this, Ancient Greek people created the initial basis of knowledge for what is now known as anatomy and physiology.

Animals were used as surrogate dissection models. Though it was understood that they were not the same as humans, they functioned as important references and opportunities for discovery.

As time passed, attitudes changed. Taboo gave way to the desire to teach and learn about the human body.
University and more formal medical education rose to prominence. Medicine moved away from the status of craft, toward a more book learned discipline. But their beginnings were humble. On average, only one dissection was performed per year due to the lack of access to cadavers.

Eventually, the demand that medical schools created for cadavers gave way to a new market: corpse theft.

As dissections were most commonly performed upon executed criminals, the practice of corpse theft—which primarily affected those of lower classes—was the worst thing that could happen to a deceased person and their families grieving process. It was a humiliating experience for families and a common worry. And yet, it was a common practice. The act of stealing corpses for the purpose of dissection was also a common part of the medical school education. Even well respected physicians such as Felix Platter participated in the activity during their training.
For centuries, a significant portion of medical cadavers were sourced from grave robbing. Though deeply unethical, consistent access to cadavers allowed for more in depth medical training and anatomical discovery. Rather than working with reference animal corpses, real cadavers allowed for mistaken knowledge to be corrected such as is the case of *rete mirabile* which is only found in deer and cows, not humans.

The spirit of anatomical discovery that existed within the 1500s with the most important practitioners of the time such as Vesalius still lives on today. All the knowledge that we use today has been based upon the actions and information of the past.