

Annotated Image

Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, or Paracelsus (1493 – 1541)

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Paracelsus, born Philippus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, is credited for achievements in a variety of fields, including medicine, astrology, botany, alchemy, theology, and philosophy. The son of the physician and alchemist Wilhelm Bombast von Hohenheim and a bondswoman of the local Benedictine monastery, Paracelsus was born and raised in Einsiedeln, Switzerland (*Figure 1*, left). After his mother's early death, the family moved to Villach, Austria, where his father practiced as a physician. At the age of 16, Paracelsus began studying medicine at the University of Basel, later attended various universities in Italy, and the University of Vienna. It is uncertain whether he ever received a doctorate.¹

Following his studies at university, Paracelsus embarked upon numerous journeys, practiced as an army surgeon, and settled in Salzburg until 1525, when he barely escaped prosecution by the archbishop for exhibiting sympathy for the insurgents in the Peasants' War.¹ Following several failed attempts to establish a medical practice and a short stay in Strasburg, Paracelsus was appointed as a lecturer of medicine at the University of Basel after providing medical advice to a physician treating Johann Froben, the famous printer and publisher, for an ailing leg¹; he held this academic position only briefly. Paracelsus elicited anger from other physicians by lecturing in German, contrary to the academic tradition of teaching in Latin, and admitting public attendance at his courses. He provokingly dismissed the traditional, purely theoretical approach to medical education, and burned the books of Galen and other respected scholars in public. A combination of his apparent disrespect for the academic establishment at the time, the animosity of the apothecaries for his attempt to control the pharmacies and limit their profits, the death of his proponent Froben, and a legal dispute about an outstanding physician's fee finally turned public mood against him, and he was forced to leave Basel in 1528.²

Years of travel accompanied by difficulty finding publishers ensued until 1536, when the publication of *Grosse Wundarznei*³, a book on surgery, helped restore his reputation.¹ Incidentally, this was the first time the name "Paracelsus" appeared in one of his works. He eventually settled in Salzburg in 1541 and died during the same year, probably from mercury poisoning. His remains were buried in the cemetery of St. Sebastian in Salzburg. Some of Paracelsus' contributions to medicine concerned the management of wounds and

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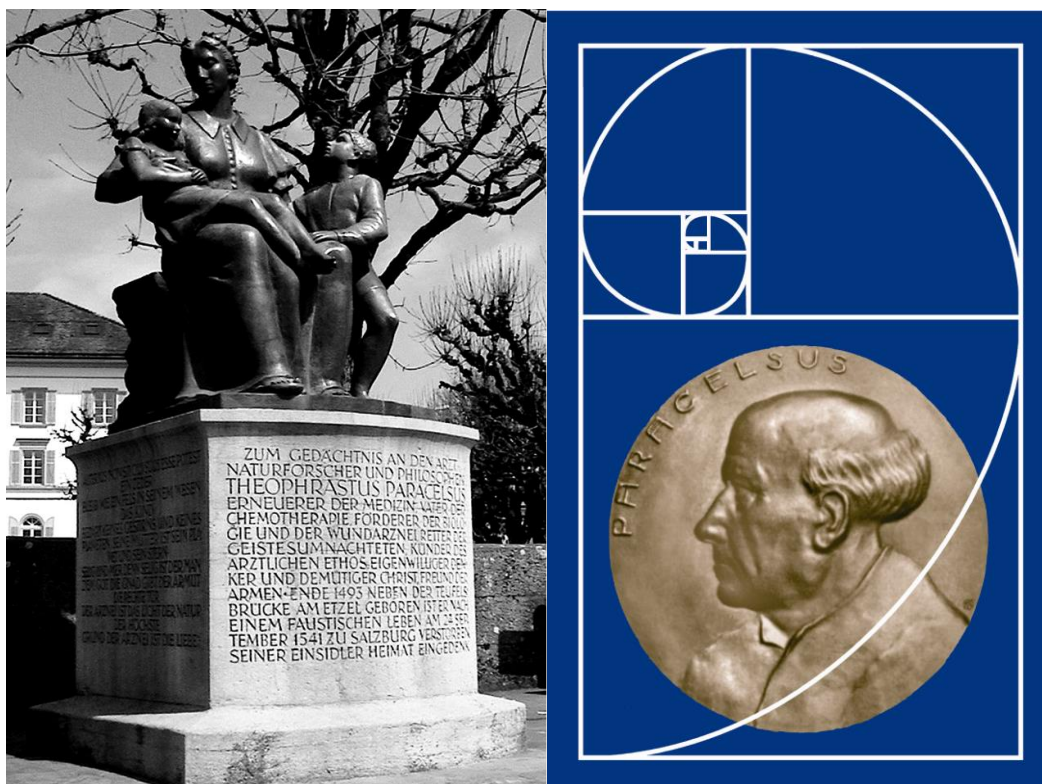


Figure 1: Left, memorial titled “Woman with two healthy children” in Paracelsus Park in Einsiedeln, Switzerland. Right, seal of the Paracelsus Medical University in Salzburg, Austria.

chronic ulcers, the description and treatment of syphilis, the characterization of silicosis in miners, and the relationship between goiters and the mineral content of drinking water.² He pioneered the use of chemicals and minerals in medicine, and revolutionized the concept of disease by linking its origin to one or more external causes and thereby demolishing the ancient notion of disease as an expression of imbalance among the humors in the body.² His aphorism, “*Alle Ding’ sind Gift, und nichts ohn’ Gift; allein die Dosis macht, daß ein Ding kein Gift ist*”, which translates as, “The dose makes the poison”, earned him the title of the “Father of Toxicology”.¹

Many awards are named after Paracelsus, including the Paracelsus Medal, the highest honor of the German medical fraternity. The names of Germany’s largest health fair and several hospitals and clinics serve as eponyms that honor Paracelsus. Finally, the Paracelsus Medical University, which was established in Salzburg in 2003 (Figure 1, right) and is one of four medical universities in Austria with the original school curriculum modeled after the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, commemorates the legacy of this accomplished figure in medicine.

REFERENCES

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