

Paracelsus and Salzburg

On September 24, 1541 in St. Sebastian's Cemetery on Linzer Gasse, Theophrast von Hohenheim, the famed physician, naturalist, philosopher and lay theologian, was laid to rest. The oeuvre this man left behind—more than 200 texts—is vast and highly challenging in its complexity. He is considered a trailblazer in several branches of science. He can be credited with achievements in the field of general medicine as well as in specialties such as occupational medicine and balneology. He is regarded as the founding father of pharmaceutical chemistry. Paracelsus was present at the birth of philosophical anthropology. As the author of approximately 100 theological texts, he was also a notable lay theologian. The impact this multifaceted scholar had on posterity and the history of how his ideas were received also make the man a figure of great significance. This is in stark contrast to what is definitely known about Hohenheim. Much of what is put forth as the facts of his life are mere conjectures, which now constitute the foundation of his biography.

The scholar had numerous connections to the City of Salzburg. Here, in 1524, he emerged for the first time from the anonymity of the sources. At the time, he was in his early 30s and had already earned his medical degree. Up to that point, there are no traces of him, neither in a European city nor a university's matriculation register.

17 years later on September 21, 1541 in Salzburg, at an inn named Zum Weißen Roß on a lane named Kaigasse, he dictated his last will and testament. He died three days later and was buried in St. Sebastian's.

A vibrant Paracelsus tradition emerged in Salzburg, and his grave soon became an attraction for visitors to the city.

Theophrast von Hohenheim was purportedly born in Einsiedeln, Switzerland in late 1493. Two portraits painted in 1538 and 1540 respectively permit this inference as to his year of birth. He was the son of Wilhelm Bombast, a licensed pharmaceutical dispenser and an illegitimate offspring of a noble family, the Bombaste von Hohenheim near Stuttgart.

A painting in the collection of the Salzburg Museum was long thought to portray the father's wedding and to include a depiction of his son, but the Hohenheim coat of arms was added retrospectively, thus making all inferences as to his family inadmissible.

The mother was the offspring of one of Einsiedeln's foremost families but was nevertheless a convent bondswoman, a serf of the Abbot of Einsiedeln. Thus, according to medieval legal principles, her son also remained a lifelong serf of the abbot, which meant inferior legal status. Personal freedom was a condition for the attainment of civil rights or admission to a guild. This was also the case in Salzburg until the Early Modern Period. This was probably a reason why he remained, throughout his life, an itinerant physician with no permanent place of residence. As a wanderer, so to speak, he was a member of one of society's fringe

groups. His whole life long, Paracelsus bridled at the stigma of bondsmanship; his Latin motto attests to this.

It is unknown how long the family remained in Switzerland. Beginning in 1502, his father was a “resident” of Villach, Carinthia, but was not the municipal physician, as numerous authors have asserted. Nor was he a teacher at a Fugger school of mining, which did not even exist at the time.

Our knowledge about his youth is based on autobiographical writings, according to which Paracelsus’ basic education was provided primarily by his father.

His knowledge of theological works was imparted by several ecclesiastical dignitaries including Bishop Matthias Scheit von Seckau. Paracelsus might have attended the monastery school of St. Paul in Lavant. One of the teachers he mentions is Nikolaus Kaps, the auxiliary bishop of Gurk who lived in Salzburg beginning in 1505. Gurker Hof, an institution in Salzburg’s Kaiviertel neighborhood, would later be frequented by Paracelsus as well. Perhaps he had already become acquainted with the City of Salzburg at that early date through Kaps.

Nikolaus Kaps was strongly influenced by the spirit of humanism and committed to reform efforts within the Church. He seems to have made a powerful impression on young Hohenheim, who also began considering theological issues at an early age.

There exist multifarious and mostly totally untenable hypotheses about Paracelsus’ formal studies and what are assumed to have been his *Große Wanderjahre* through Europe.

There is no proof that he was awarded a baccalaureate degree in medicine from the University of Vienna in 1510.

All that we ultimately know—if Paracelsus is to be believed—is that he successfully concluded his studies in Ferrara, earning a degree as both a doctor of medicine and a surgeon. Nevertheless, prominent medical historians call this claim into doubt.

According to Paracelsus’ own accounts, he acquired surgical skills and knowledge of treating wounds as an army doctor during several European wars. It is assumed that this was from 1516 to 1524 during his extensive travels through Europe.

Some analysts, proceeding on the basis of references in his writings, have attempted to reconstruct journeys as far as Egypt, however the proper place for these ideas is the realm of legend. Paracelsus traveled first and foremost through Central Europe.

In any case, Hohenheim’s first medical texts were written around 1520. They display early indications of his theological proclivity and introduce concepts of later theological works.

At the time, he considered himself not only a physician but also a theologian. His core theological concept was an indissoluble entity made up of medical and theological theory.

His text on the subject of *Bergsucht*, an illness endemic to miners, was also possibly written in the early ‘20s. It is presumably connected to Hohenheim’s sojourn in Schwaz, Tyrol.

He then seems to have made his way to the Gastein/Rauris mining region in the Province of Salzburg, where he came into contact with local mine owners and also got acquainted with the therapeutic baths of Gastein. Around 1525, he wrote his *Baderbüchlein* in which he elaborates on 17 European thermal spas and mineral springs, and displays detailed knowledge of the therapeutic effects of Gastein's water as well as familiarity with the local facts and circumstances in the mining industry. Accordingly, there is no doubt that he spent time in Gastein.

There exists a copy of a letter dated August 15, 1524 that attests to Hohenheim's presence in the episcopal residence city of Salzburg. This is the first piece of historical source material substantiating a fact of his curriculum vitae.

His address at the time was Pfeifergasse 11 in Kaiviertel. The building was near Rapplbad, Salzburg's foremost bath. Here, he was able to establish himself as a physician.

That Hohenheim lived here at an early stage of his stay in Salzburg did not become known until 1918 with the discovery of a copy of a 1526 inventory of his possessions.

A plaque commemorating his stay has adorned the building at Pfeifergasse 11 since 1937. His circle of friends was also made up of those who frequented the bath and his Kaiviertel neighbors. He was friends with Hans Rappl, the owner of Rapplbad, who received a bequest in his will.

There is also proof that Hohenheim was a regular at the inn of Christoph Reiß on what is now Mozartplatz. This establishment was razed by Archbishop Wolf Dietrich's urban renewal project to make Salzburg a residence city befitting a prince.

Reiß was no simple innkeeper. He had attended college in Ingolstadt, was co-owner of a mine, and a member of the city council. He was mayor of Salzburg in 1541, the year Paracelsus died.

Paracelsus' friends were members of the haute bourgeoisie; some had a university education; they were surely not from among the common folk, as was previously assumed. His bourgeois friends also provided Paracelsus with a forum for the discussion of the ecclesiastical issues that excited the passions of observers in those days.

Martin Luther had broken with the Catholic Church once and for all in 1520. His former religious superior, Johann von Staupitz, switched allegiance to the Benedictines and served as abbot of St. Peter's Monastery in Salzburg from 1522 until his death in 1524. Though he rebuked Luther, he invited him to come to Salzburg and to live and die with him here.

The Salzburg bourgeoisie and above all the wealthy mining entrepreneurs had contacts with Luther from a very early stage in his career, and several Salzburgers studied in Wittenberg. Paracelsus, the young physician, already began turning his attention to theological matters in the early 1520s—where, we do not know. He authored polemics critical of the Church.

The earliest dated works among his theological writings were penned in Salzburg.

One was a treatise on the Virgin Mary that, according to the cover letter dated August 15, 1524, was written in Salzburg. It mentions a summons to continue a disputation with three theologians who were his friends.

Paracelsus excused his decision to not attend the disputation by citing his speech problem. And he was afraid of losing his intellectual self-control in such heated debates.

In a treatise on the Trinity written three weeks later, he defended himself against the charge of being a heretic—indeed, an arch-heretic.

In a third treatise composed in early 1525, he vehemently criticized the “7 points of Christian idolatry.” He defended himself against the charges of two Italian theologians who dismissed his utterances made in inns as products of drunkenness. At the time, he was considered a physician and not a theologian; thus, Paracelsus was suspected of being a “street-corner preacher” who riled up the peasants.

Finally, there exists a letter Paracelsus sent to Wittenberg’s Big Three—Martin Luther, Johannes Bugenhagen and Philipp Melanchthon—from Salzburg in late March 1525. Modern researchers no longer question the letter’s authenticity. It includes his exegesis of the first five chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. The reaction to it is not known.

In Salzburg, Paracelsus completed his internal process of turning away from the Roman Church. At the time, he still regarded his position as reconcilable with that of the Wittenbergers. Later, he made a name for himself as an individualistic religious thinker who could not be confined to a particular category. He fulminated in equal measure against the adherents of the Pope, Luther and Zwingli.

He was thus counted among the “radical reformers” who emerged in opposition to the Lutheran and Zwinglian Reformation movements—men like Thomas Münzer, the Anabaptist and so-called “Dreamers.”

As a radical reformer, he developed his own theology based on the fundamental ideas of the early Reformation. He preferred a spiritual church to an institutional one and was numbered among the Spiritualists.

Formally, though, Paracelsus remained in the Roman Church. Perhaps he merely pretended to adhere to Catholicism and the official church.

His early theological writings confront those working on the history of Salzburg with many open questions. No evidence has been found in Salzburg documenting Paracelsus’ contacts with the theologians with whom he claimed to have corresponded. Nor is there evidence of contact with Luther’s mentor Staupitz, the archbishop’s court, or local monasteries.

His theological commitment—purported to have been so intense—left no traces in the sources. It is certainly possible that Paracelsus, like many of his contemporaries, leveled strong criticism at the Church and its representatives, but he surely did not travel about as a

boisterous lay preacher and thereby become embroiled in heated controversies with the authorities.

What several authors assumed to have been a bitter conflict between Hohenheim and Salzburg's absolutist prince, Cardinal Matthäus Lang, has since been disproven. We do not know whether the two men were even acquainted.

Paracelsus' possible involvement in Salzburg's Peasant War in 1525 is not verifiable.

His autobiographical assertions about incitement of the peasants was sometimes interpreted as an allusion to his having played a leading role in the uprising of the mine owners, miners and peasants.

There is no proof of this. The conjecture that the cardinal had him arrested and interrogated, whereupon he left Salzburg once and for all, can likewise be consigned to the realm of legend.

A copy of the minutes of a meeting in 1526 provides us with our only knowledge that Paracelsus had left the City of Salzburg in a big hurry at the outset of the Peasant War in late May 1525. He left innkeeper Christoph Reiß holding his assets as well as his liabilities.

Hohenheim's possessions were inventoried at the request of his friend Michael Setznagel, who had attended the University of Vienna beginning in 1510.

It was long presumed that, due to his involvement in the Peasant War, Paracelsus could never again return to Salzburg as long as Lang was still alive.

Some scholars have referred to a Salzburg Catastrophe in Hohenheim's life. Local boosters have speculated that their beloved Salzburg was the focal point of his dreams, the spot to which he yearned to return. What we must keep in mind is that the city, though the residence of a prince-archbishop, had neither a medical school nor a university—to say nothing of a print shop!

The great hopes that the humanists at court had invested in Cardinal Matthäus Lang went unfulfilled. The bourgeoisie was oppressed, religious self-determination nonexistent. From 1524 on, no one from Salzburg was permitted to study in Wittenberg.

Over the next 15 years, Paracelsus resided above all in major urban centers, college towns and imperial cities with important book publishers!

After having left Salzburg in 1525, he traveled to southwestern Germany and became a citizen of Straßburg in 1526. The following year, he was appointed city physician of Basel and taught at the university there, but in the wake of disputes with members of the medical school faculty, he had to beat a hasty retreat from there. Colmar and Esslingen were stops along his way to the imperial city of Nürnberg, where his first writings under the name Paracelsus were published. He was back in Switzerland (St. Gallen, Bad Pfäfers) beginning in 1531. The next entry on his résumé was Ulm, followed by Augsburg, where Hohenheim's

first major medical work, the *Große Wundarzney* on the treatment of wounds, appeared in 1536. Then came stints in Moravský Krumlov, Bratislava and Vienna.

In 1538, Paracelsus returned to Carinthia, which he referred to as his second homeland. His itineraries in the last years of his life can be reconstructed solidly for the most part.

As he neared the end, Paracelsus seems to have turned his attention back to Salzburg, where Cardinal Matthäus Lang was presumed to be at death's door—the dementia from which he had long suffered was worsening.

His successor had already been chosen—Duke Ernst von Bayern, an enthusiastic book collector who was especially interested in innovations in mining and metallurgy as well as in alchemy.

In March 1540, Paracelsus refused to make a house call in Pettau because he was expecting a letter announcing his recall. We do not know if it was to Salzburg, as many have presumed.

In any case, it is documented that on April 15, 1541 Paracelsus spent time in Schober, a town now known as Strobl on Wolfgangsee, a lake near Salzburg.

There is indisputable proof that Paracelsus was in Salzburg in the summer of 1541.

His circle of acquaintances and friends was the same as in 1525—those who frequented Salzburg's baths and members of the urban bourgeoisie. He was accompanied by a servant, Klaus Frachmaier.

Nevertheless, we lack confirmation of his often-presumed contacts with Duke Ernst von Bayern.

Nor do we know for sure where he lived then. It was not until a relatively late date that the building in which he purportedly resided, Platzl Nr. 3, became associated with the famed tenant. But there are good reasons to believe that he did indeed occupy quarters there in 1540 or 1541.

Since the 18th century, this has been the site of a portrait of Hohenheim bearing an inscription stating that he died here.

A painting depicting Paracelsus looking from this building towards the Stadtbrücke could have been painted only after 1600, when the bridge over the Salzach shown in it was built at that location.

That Hohenheim resided on Platzl was an established fact for his biographer, the great Paracelsus scholar Karl Sudhoff.

Accordingly, in 1912, he approved affixing to the building a commemorative plaque identifying it as Paracelsus' dwelling.

Thanks to the preservation of his last will and testament as well as the latest chemical analyses of his remains, we have solid knowledge about his final days, his death, and his

fatal illness. Thus, we can finally put to rest the speculations of murder that have cropped up in this connection.

The very learned Mister Dr. Theophrastus dictated his last will and testament on September 21, 1541 in a room at Zum Weißen Roß on Kaigasse.

He provided for his relatives in Einsiedeln, his Salzburg friends, and the executor of his estate. He bequeathed what was left over to the city's poor.

His last will and testament was printed in 1574 in Strasbourg by Michael Toxites; the original has not survived.

Paracelsus died three days later on September 24, 1541. He had treated an inflammation with mercury, and ultimately died of mercury poisoning.

In accordance with his final wish, he was buried in the paupers' cemetery of Bruderhaus St. Sebastian, a home for the aged and infirm in what was then a Salzburg suburb.

In 1542, 10 Gulden from Paracelsus' estate was disbursed to Bruderhaus. The corresponding accounting entry is preserved in the Salzburg Municipal Archive.

His last will and testament also called for bequests to his friends and the surgeon who treated him.

Paracelsus' friend Michael Setznagel, a Salzburg civil servant, donated a tomb slab praising Theophrast's contributions to the art of healing.

In 1554, one of the earliest publications issued by the first print shop founded in Salzburg was a book attributed to Paracelsus about the plague. The publisher was Egidius Karl, then the prior of St. Peter's Abbey.

Around 1600, travelers were already visiting Paracelsus' grave, which was left untouched by the renovation of St. Sebastian's Cemetery. Then, in 1752, Salzburg Archbishop Andreas Jakob Count Dietrichstein commissioned his court architect, Franz Anton Danreiter, to construct a magnificent mausoleum in the church's vestibule. This was Salzburg's first memorial to a layman.

In a chamber within the monument, Hohenheim's bones are preserved like relics.

Pilgrimages were made to his grave—for example, during the cholera epidemic of 1831.

Scientific research on Paracelsus commenced in the 19th century in Salzburg too. A Paracelsus biography by Berlin physician Michael Lessing earned its author honorary citizenship of the City of Salzburg in 1839. Research on the locations at which Hohenheim did his work also began at this time.

During the Third Reich, the Nazis co-opted Paracelsus as a German physician. The 1941 jubilee year was celebrated by issuing countless publications, the effects of which persisted long after their release. The upshot was that young scholars turned away from Paracelsus.

The Nazis commemorated the 1941 Paracelsus Year in Salzburg as well with a major exhibition. The first Paracelsus Society was founded.

A Paracelsus Museum, a Paracelsus Hospital and a Paracelsus University were planned. Josef Thorak a sculptor currently at the center of controversy, created a Paracelsus statue in 1943; it now stands in Kurgarten, a downtown park.

The Nazi's Paracelsus Society was dissolved after the war and its assets were transferred to a new International Paracelsus Society founded in 1951.

There were continuities with respect to personnel; nevertheless, the International Paracelsus Society was a key driving force and *Salzburger Beiträge zur Paracelsusforschung* became an important periodical for researchers in this field.

In 1993, the State of Salzburg commemorated the 500th anniversary of Hohenheim's birth with conferences and major publications. Afterwards, interest in this man faded away. There arose the fallacy that all research had been done; the focus shifted to the reception accorded to these finding.

In 2015, the International Paracelsus Society had to be disbanded due to a lack of members. At the same time, Ulrich Fellmeth, Peter Marty and Peter F. Kramml set up an International Paracelsus Platform on the University of Hohenheim's server. Our aim was to keep international networking alive.

To prevent the Paracelsus tradition from being totally neglected in Salzburg in the wake of the International Paracelsus Society's dissolution, a new local Paracelsus Society Salzburg was founded as a subgroup of the *Freunde der Salzburger Geschichte* in order to protect the name Paracelsus from commercial exploitation.

After all, the name Paracelsus has been marketed intensively since the 19th century—there are food & beverage establishments, pharmaceuticals, and, since 1893, even a beer bearing Paracelsus' name.

On a more positive note, his scientific achievements have been singled out for recognition by naming streets, pharmacies and clinics after him.

In Salzburg, he is memorialized by a spa named the Paracelsus Kurhaus and the Paracelsus Medizinische Privatuniversität, a medical school founded in 2002.

A cast bronze statue of Paracelsus by Josef Zenzmaier was unveiled on that university's campus in December 2015.

And the Paracelsus Ring is the highest scholarly honor bestowed by the City of Salzburg. It was most recently awarded in 2011 to the last president of the International Paracelsus Society Salzburg, Heinz Dopsch.

Peter F. Kramml