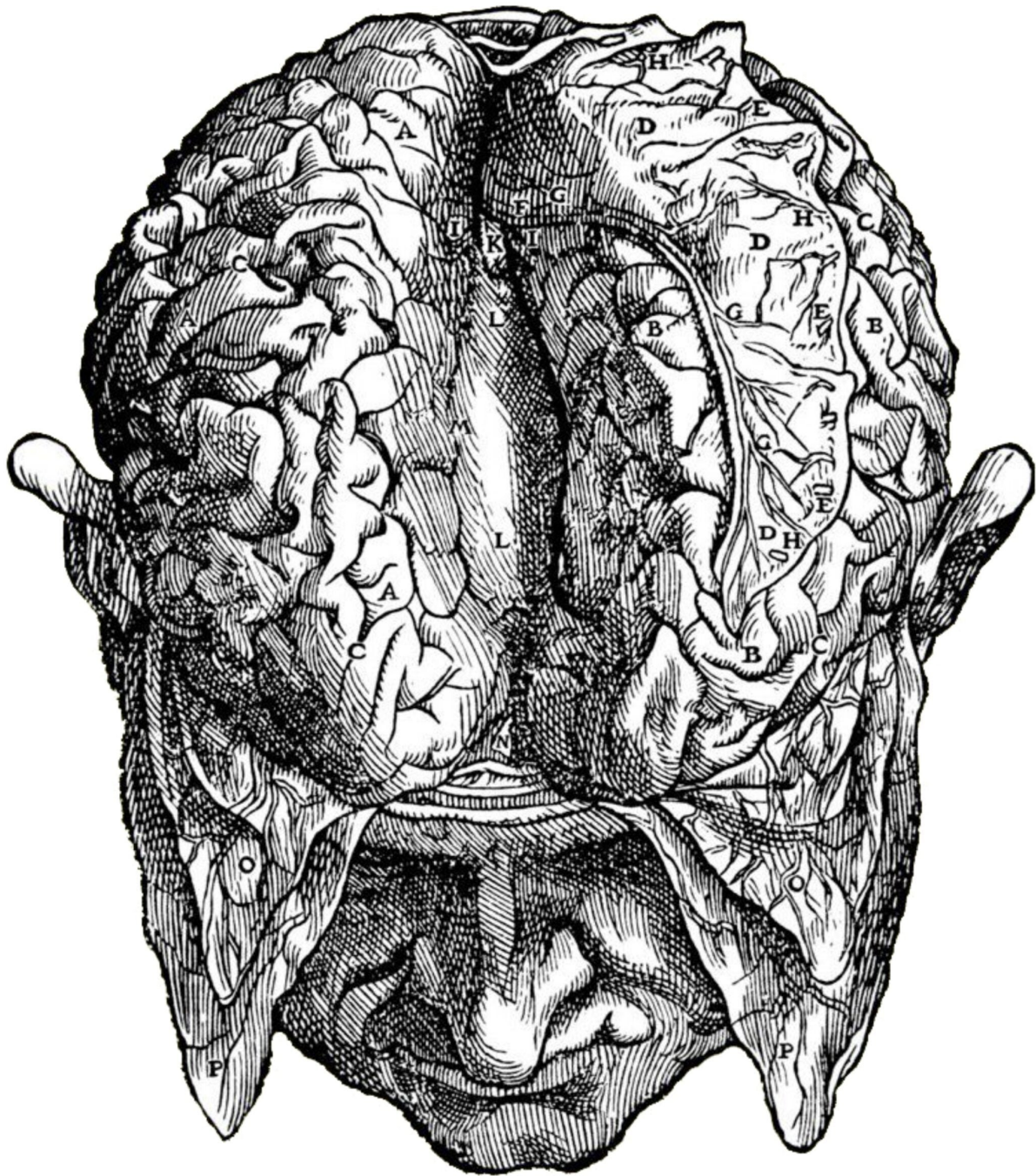


Looking at the Human Brain: from Vesalius to the Present

Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) published his *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (On the Fabric of the Human Body) in 1543 (O'Malley, 1964). This book, based on dissections of human cadavers, provided illustrations of the human brain that were both anatomically correct and esthetically pleasing. The scientists that followed Vesalius expanded on our knowledge, and produced their own representations of the human brain. This essay traces the evolution of these pictures.

The View from Above

One of Vesalius' most striking illustrations shows the head of a man with the top of his skull (calvarium) removed (Catani & Sandrone, 2015, p 220). The cerebral meninges (membranes) – composed of the dura mater (tough mother, P in the illustration) and the arachnoid mater (spidery mother, O) – were cut in the midline and then folded down over the edge of the skull. The cerebral hemispheres (A and B) were spread apart and the falx cerebri (cerebral sickle, D) was pulled up and folded over the left hemisphere. This revealed the corpus callosum (tough body, L) connecting the two hemispheres. At the base of the falx cerebri was a large vein later known as the inferior sagittal sinus (F, G).



In 1656, Vesalius' illustration served as a model for Rembrandt's representation of the brain in *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Deyman*. The original painting portrayed the professor and his students in much the same way as the earlier painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). After the painting was damaged by fire in 1723, all that remains are the hands of the professor as he dissects the meninges, his assistant holding the calvarium, and the cadaver of the

recently executed thief, Joris Fonteyn, also known as “Black Jan:”



Anne Carson wrote a brief prose poem about the painting in her *Short Talks* (1992):*

A winter so cold that, walking on the Breestraat and you passed from sun to shadow, you could feel the difference run down your skull like water. It was the hunger winter of 1656 when Black Jan took up with a whore named Elsje Ottje and for a time they prospered. But one icy January day Black Jan was observed robbing a cloth merchant's house. He ran, fell, knifed a man and was hanged on the twenty-seventh of January. How he fared then is no doubt known to you: the cold weather permitted Dr. Deyman to turn the true eye of medicine on Black Jan for three days. One wonders if Elsje ever saw Rembrandt's painting, which shows her love thief in

violent frontal foreshortening, so that his pure soles seem almost to touch the chopped-open cerebrum. Cut and cut deep to find the source of the problem, Dr. Deyman is saying as he parts the brain to either side like hair. Sadness comes groping out of it.

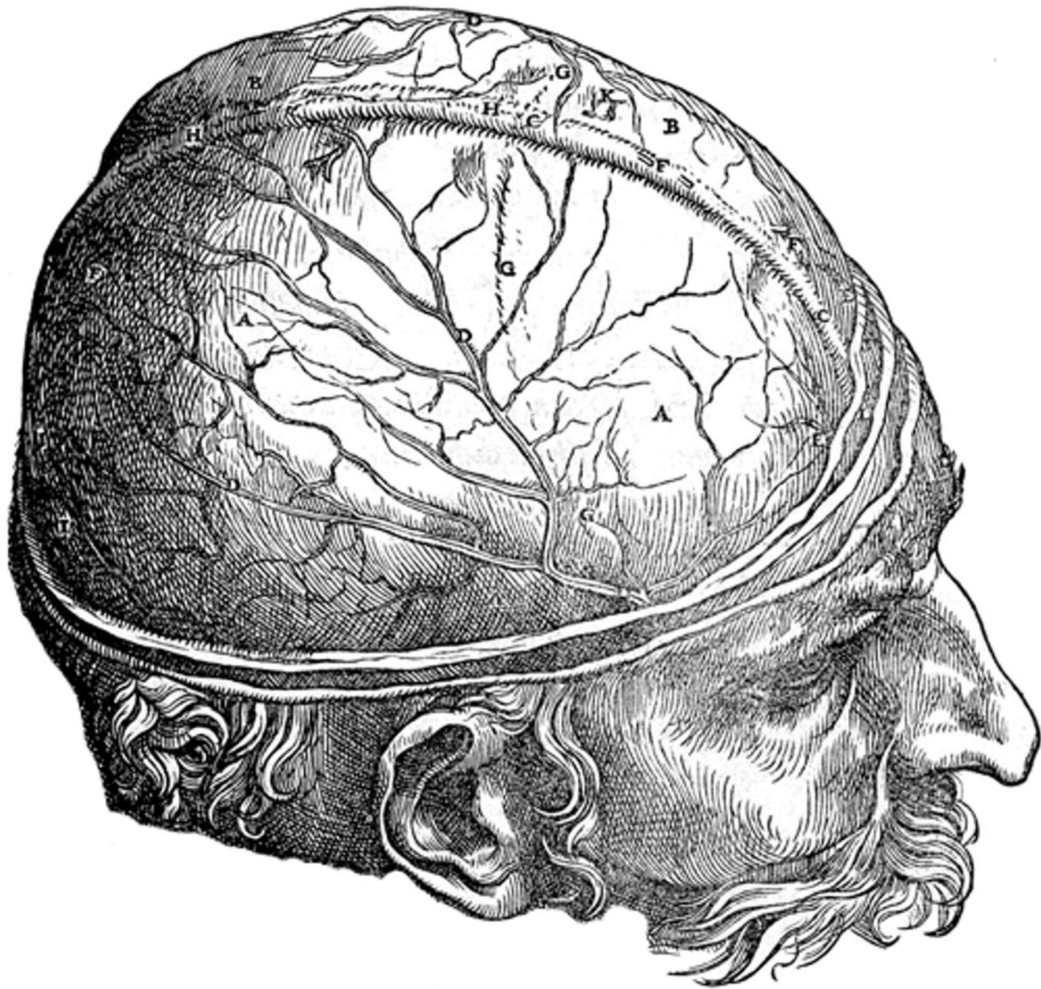
Carson uses two striking images: the transition from sun to shadow like water on the skull, and the parting of the brain like hair. She also remarks on the foreshortening – Rembrandt was using Mantegna's *Lamentation of the Dead Christ* (1480) as a model. And she sadly links the soles of the feet to the soul of Black Jan, recently released from his cerebrum.

In a series of engravings to illustrate the brain (1802), Charles Bell produced a delicately colored view of the brain and meninges (available from the Wellcome website) very similar to that of Vesalius. The dura mater (B) is folded away. The arachnoid mater is preserved over the left hemisphere. The arachnoid mater (D) from the right hemisphere is folded over the left hemisphere. Bell identified anterior middle and posterior lobes (H, I, K) in the right hemisphere but these were not clearly demarcated. Deep in the cerebral fissure can be seen the corpus callosum (L) and the anterior cerebral artery (M).

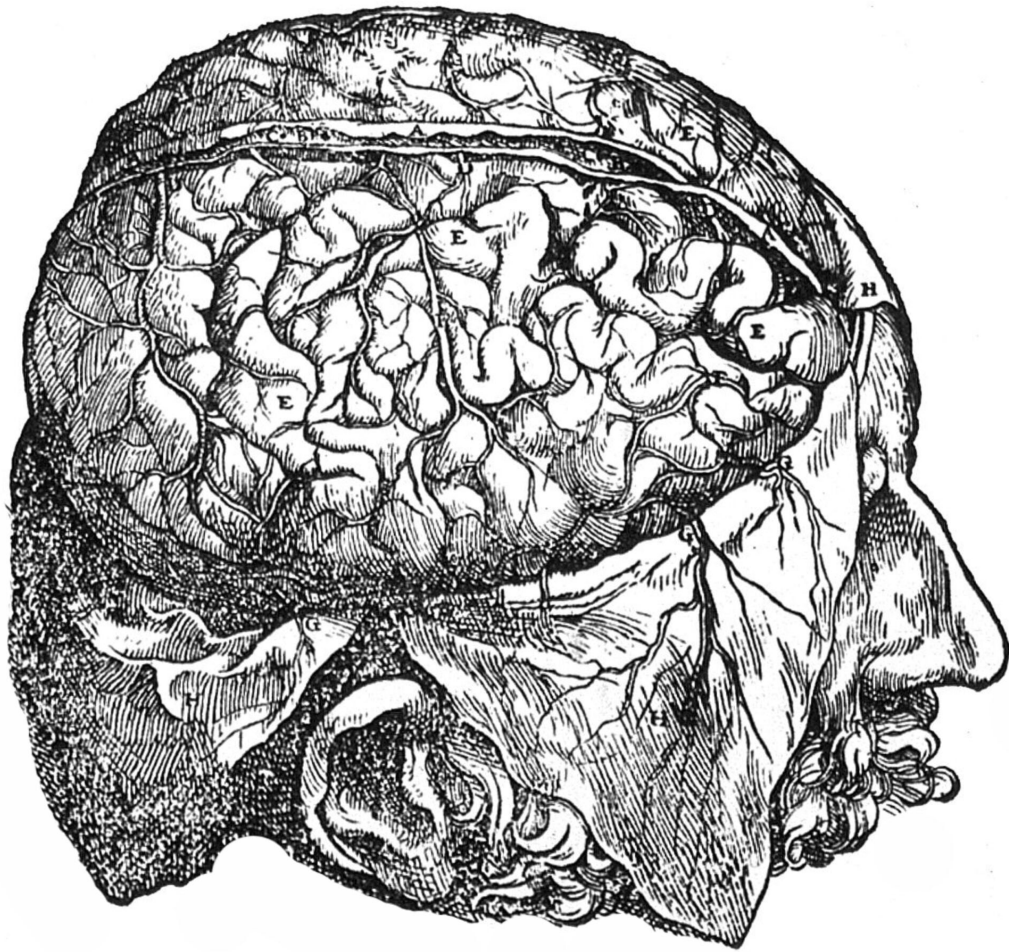


The View from the Side

The first illustration of the brain in Vesalius' book shows the dura mater looks viewed from the side once the skull has been removed. Of note are the superior sagittal sinus (C), and the paired blood vessels (D) that we now know as the middle meningeal artery and vein. This was before William Harvey's 1628 differentiation of the arteries and veins



The dura was cut through and both dura and arachnoid mater were folded down over the edge of the skull to reveal the underlying brain. Vesalius made no effort to delineate the cerebral surface accurately. The cerebral gyri are reminiscent of the random coils of the small intestine.

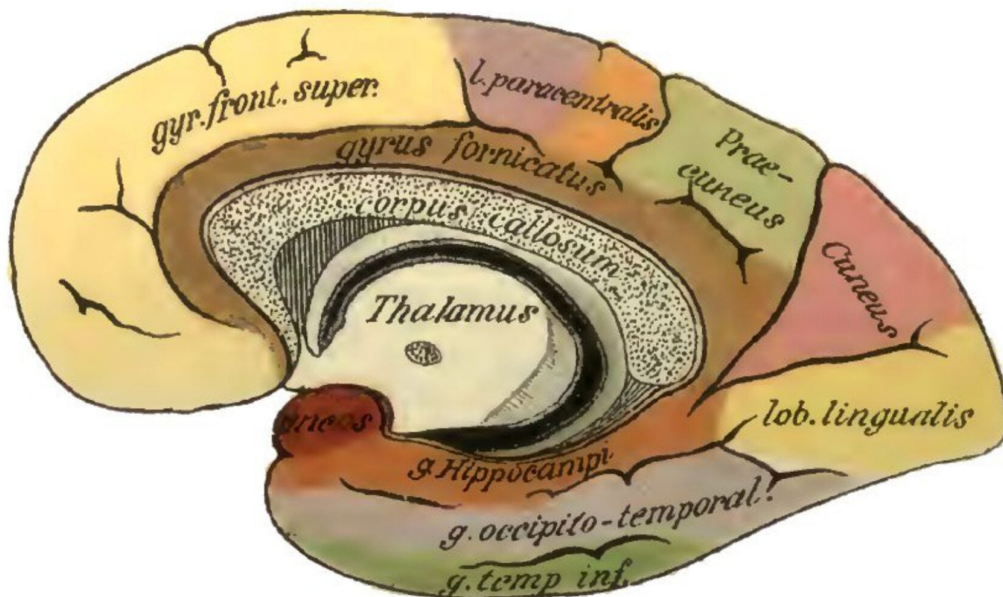
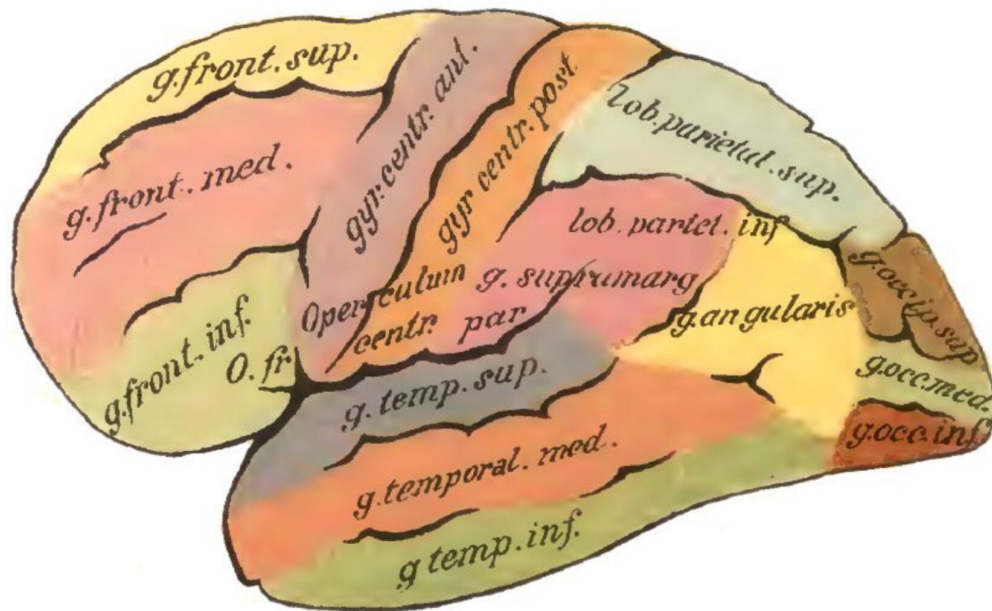


It was not really until the 19th Century that more realistic depictions of the cerebral gyri and sulci became available. The following illustration is from a series of beautiful hand-colored etchings produced by the surgeon John Lizars and his father Daniel Lizars in about 1825. The cerebrum and the cerebellum are well represented, together with their arteries and veins (with their red and blue colors accentuated). However, the orientation of the brainstem and its connections to the spinal cord are quite distorted.

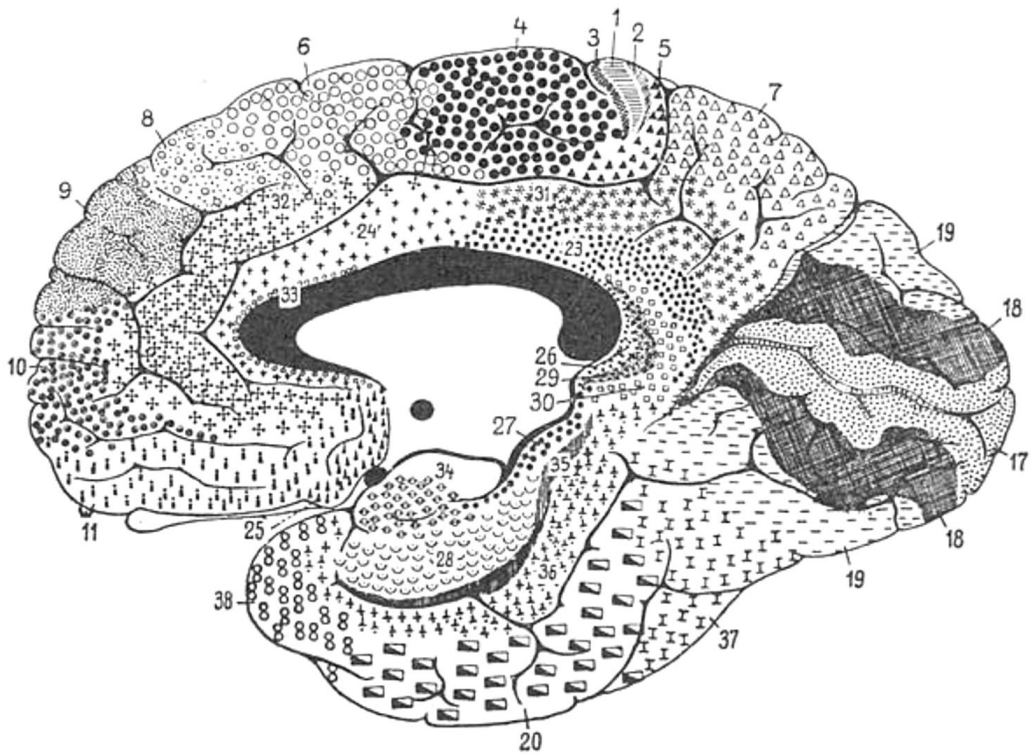
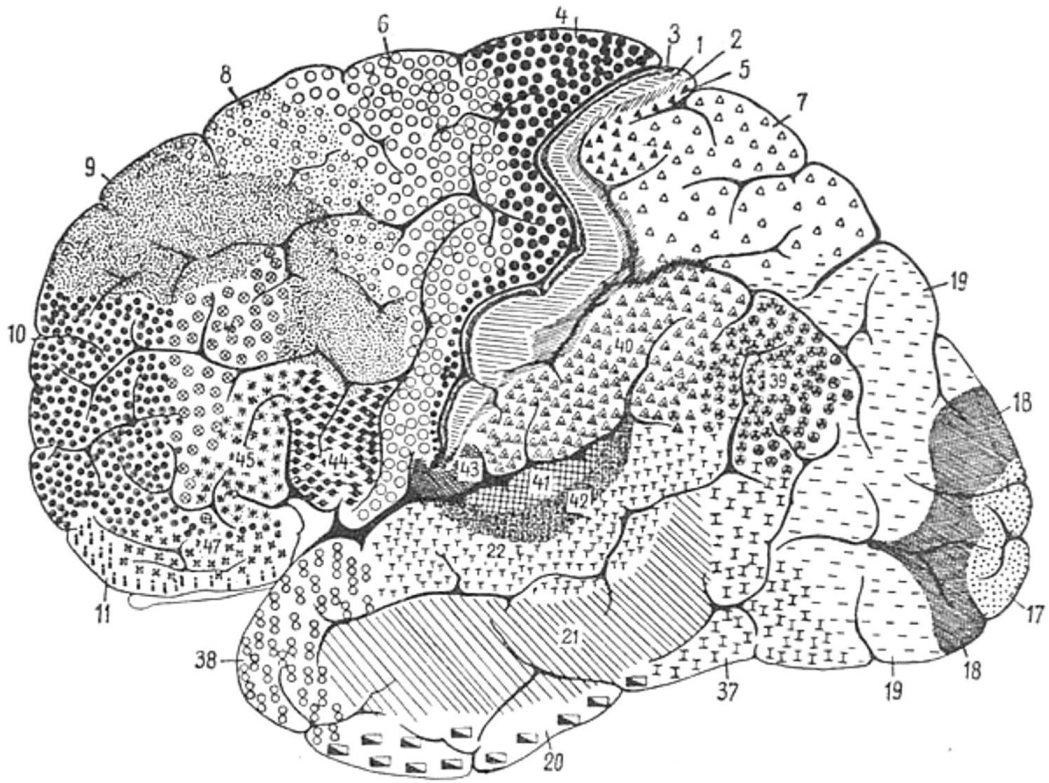


It was not until late in the 19th Century, as physiologists began to study the localization of function, that images distinguished the different gyri of the cerebrum. The following illustration is from the atlas of Christfried Jakob (1895). The gyrus fornicatus (arched), now known as the cingulate (girdle) gyrus, is an important part of the limbic system which mediates visceral sensation, emotion and memory.

The word fornication (extramarital sex) derives from ancient brothels, which often provided vaulted or arched chambers for their clients.



In 1909 the German anatomist Korbinian Brodmann further differentiated the cerebral cortex into 52 regions based on microscopic analysis of the cortical structure (Brodmann,

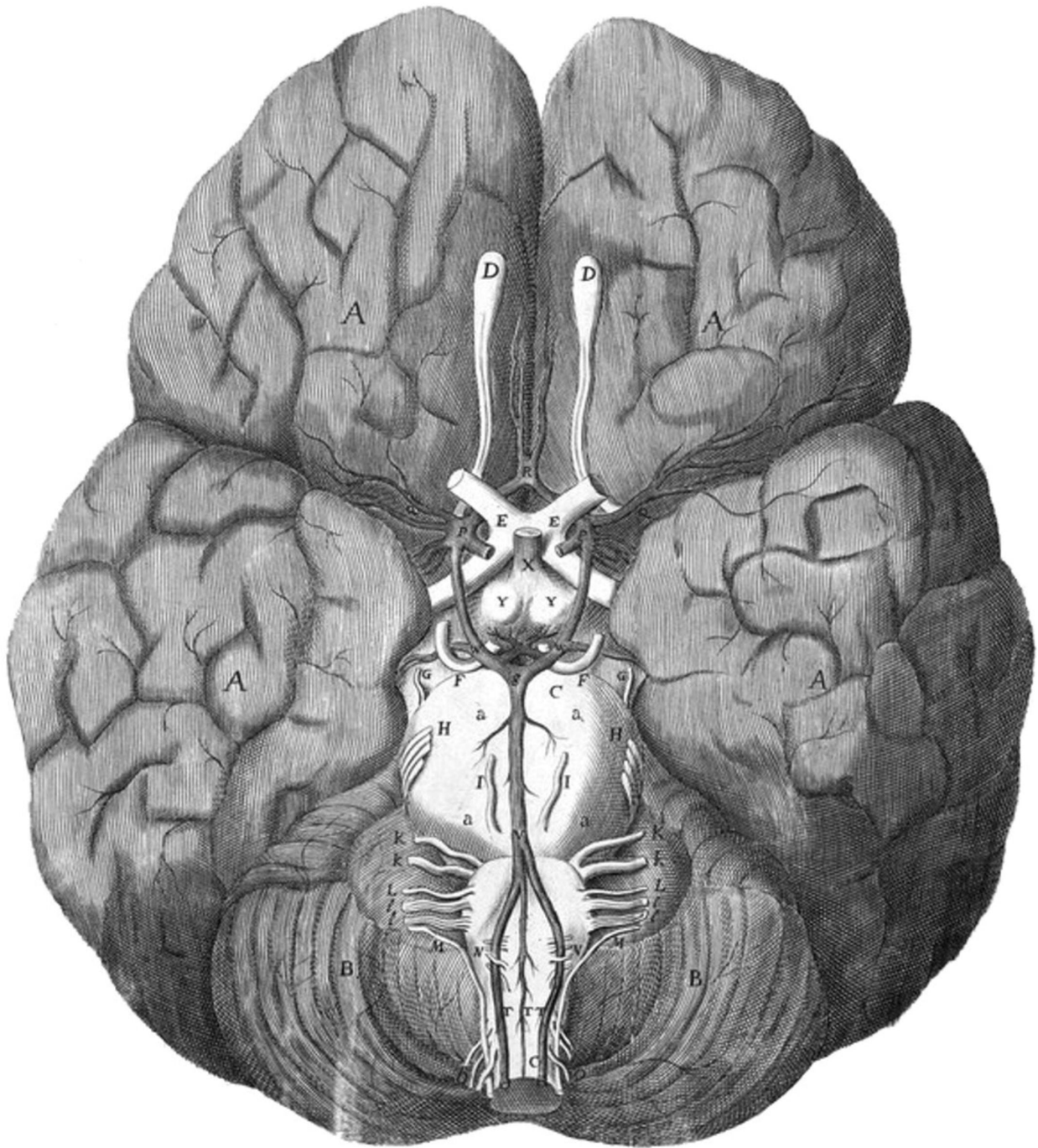


Areas 1, 2, and 3 represent the primary somatosensory cortex

on the postcentral gyrus. Area 4 is the primary motor cortex on the precentral gyrus. Area 17 is the primary visual cortex is the primary visual cortex located in and around the calcarine fissure. Areas 41 and 42 are auditory areas located on the superior surface of the temporal lobe. The areas are similar in the brains of other primates. However, area 10 in the frontal lobes and areas 39 and 40 at the temporoparietal junction are particularly important. In the human brain.

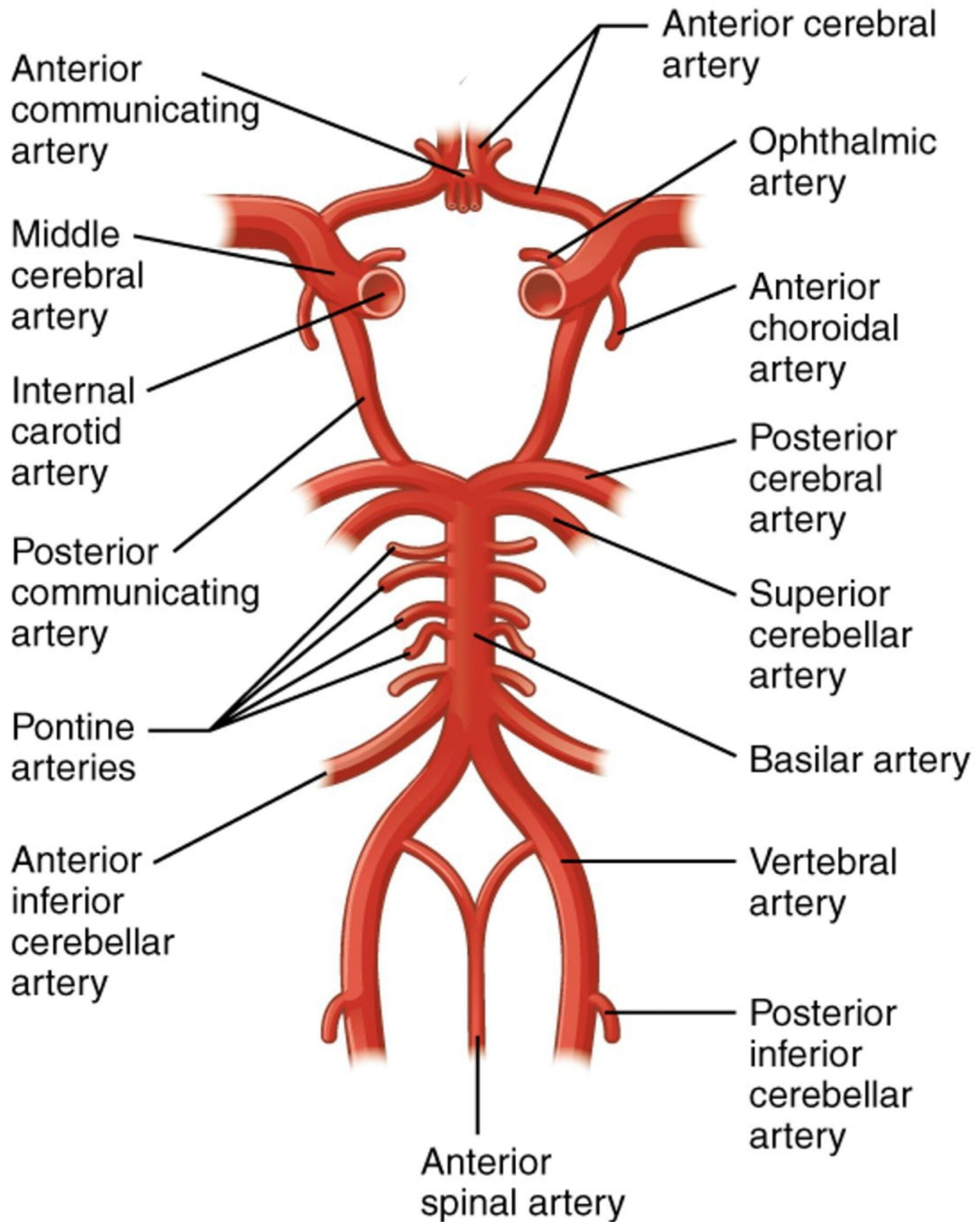
The View from Below

There is an illustration of the human brain viewed from below in Vesalius' book, but it is "still relatively crude and the brain stem in particular is unlife-like" (Clarke & Dewhurst, 1972, p 62). In his *Cerebri Anatome* (1664), Thomas Willis provided what has become the classical view of the base of the human brain. The original drawing was by Christopher Wren, the architect of St Paul's cathedral (Scatliff & Johnston, 2014).



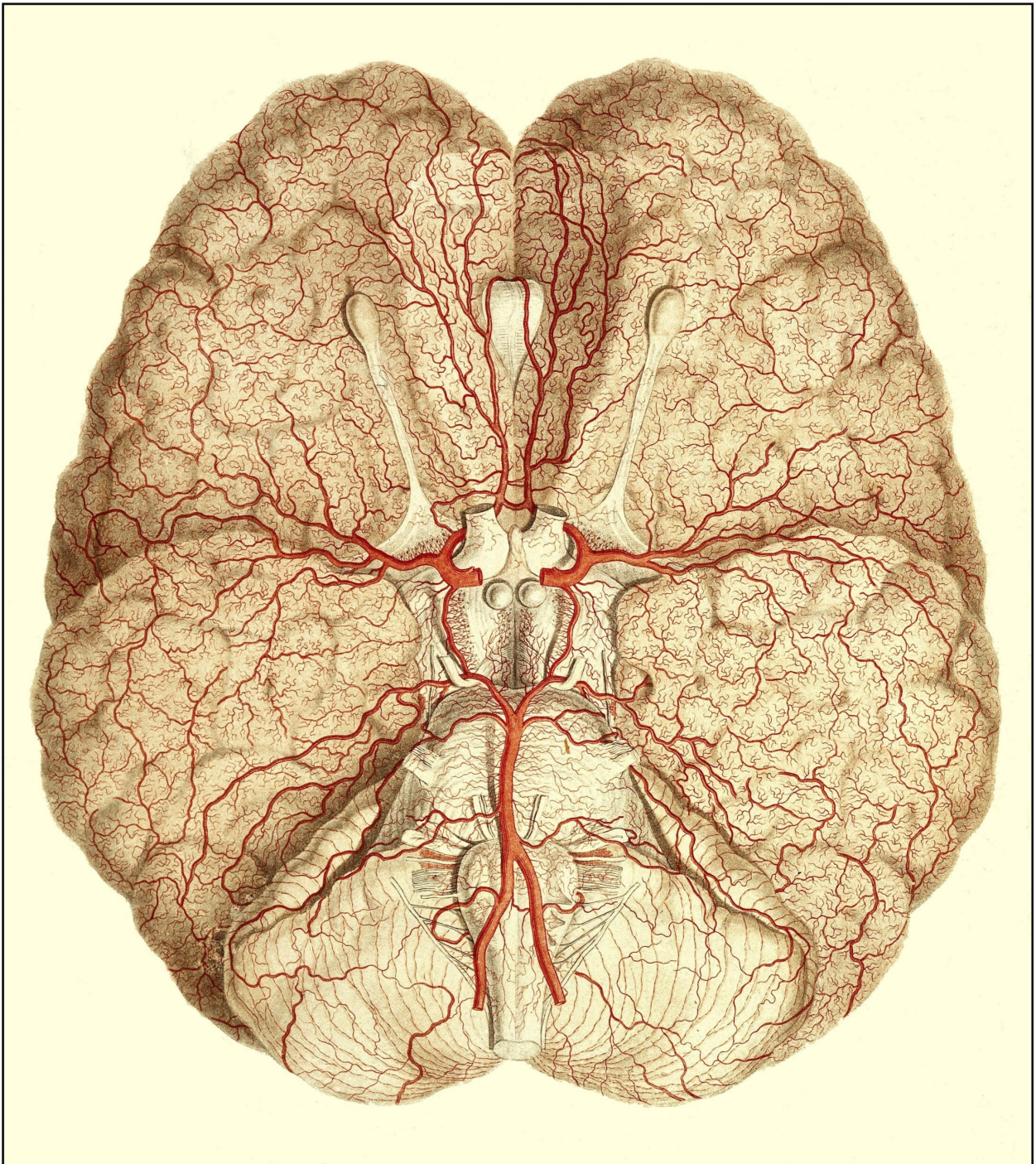
The drawing clearly demarcates the structures at the top of the brain stem: the olfactory bulb and tract (D), the optic nerve and chiasm (E), the stalk of the pituitary gland (X), and the mammillary bodies (Y). Willis shows cranial nerves of the midbrain: the oculomotor nerve (F), the trochlear nerve (G). The trigeminal nerve (H) is properly located. The lower

cranial nerves are not well demarcated. These were not clearly distinguished until the work of Samuel Soemmerring in 1778 (Storey, 2022). One of the most important aspects of Willis's illustration is that it shows the connections between the arteries supplying the brain: the circle of Willis (illustrated below). His drawing shows the complete circle but the arteries supplying the cerebellum are missing.



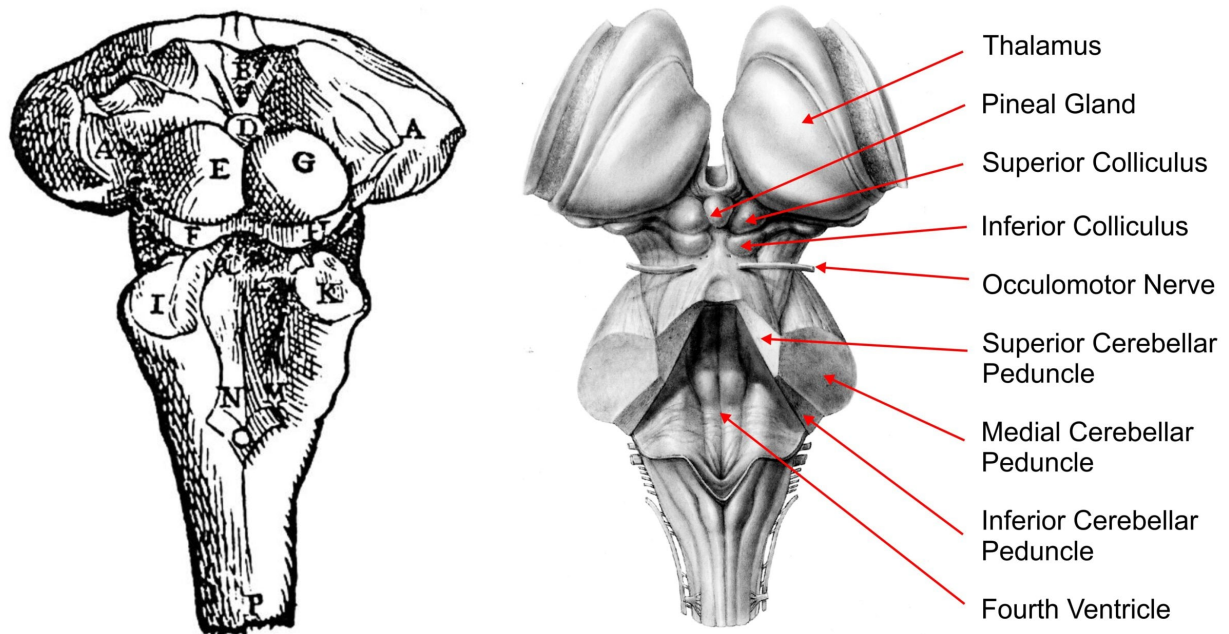
Félix Vicq-d’Azyr produced a more colorful version of the basal brain in 1786 (Plate XIX). The beautiful plates for his book were produced by the engraver Alexandre Briceau. The cerebellar arteries are shown, and the frontal lobes are

separated to reveal the corpus callosum:



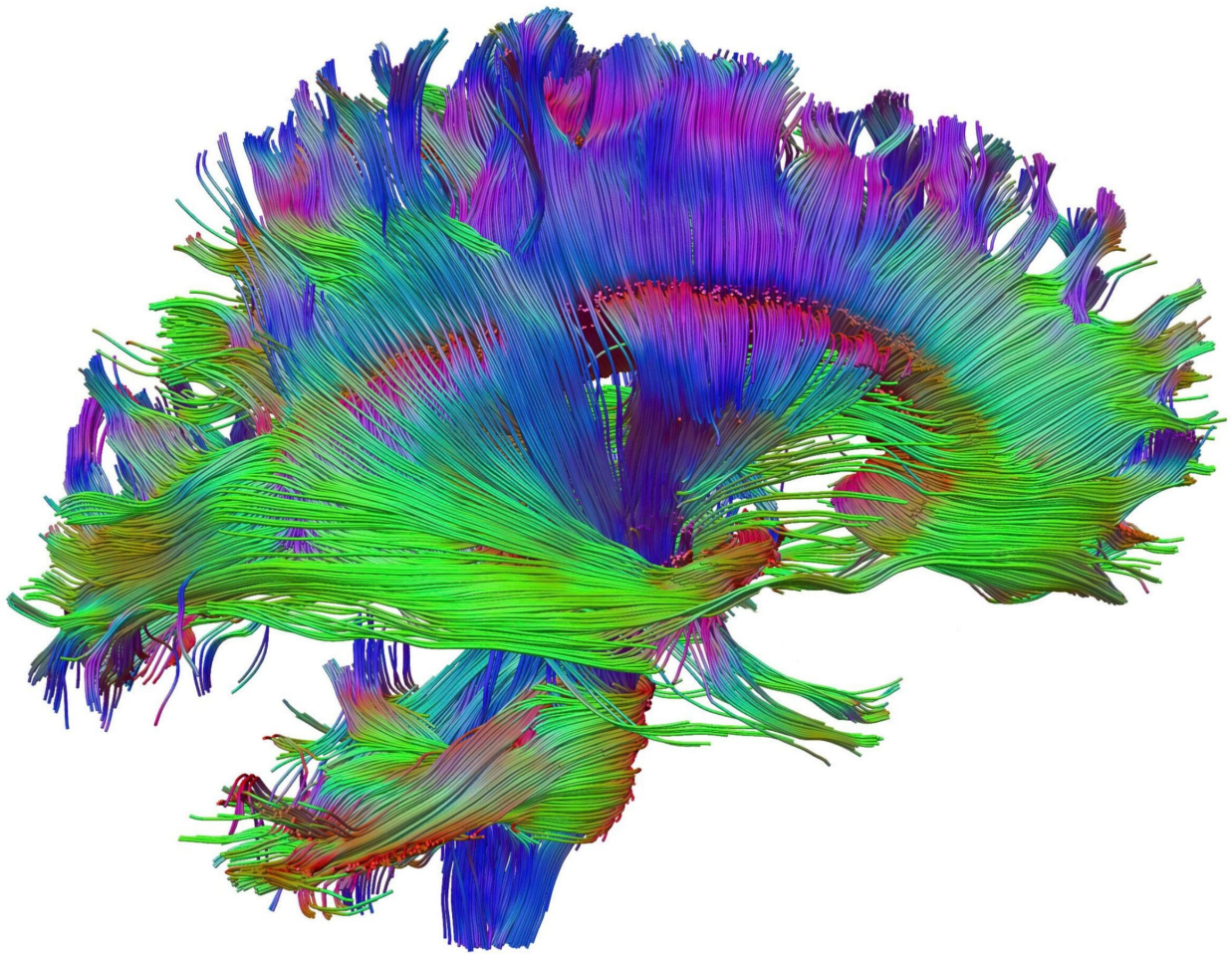
Views of the Brain Stem

After removing the cerebral hemispheres and the cerebellum, the dorsal aspect of the brainstem becomes visible. Vesalius' drawing of the brain stem is shown below together with a more anatomically correct diagram (derived from Martin, 2012):



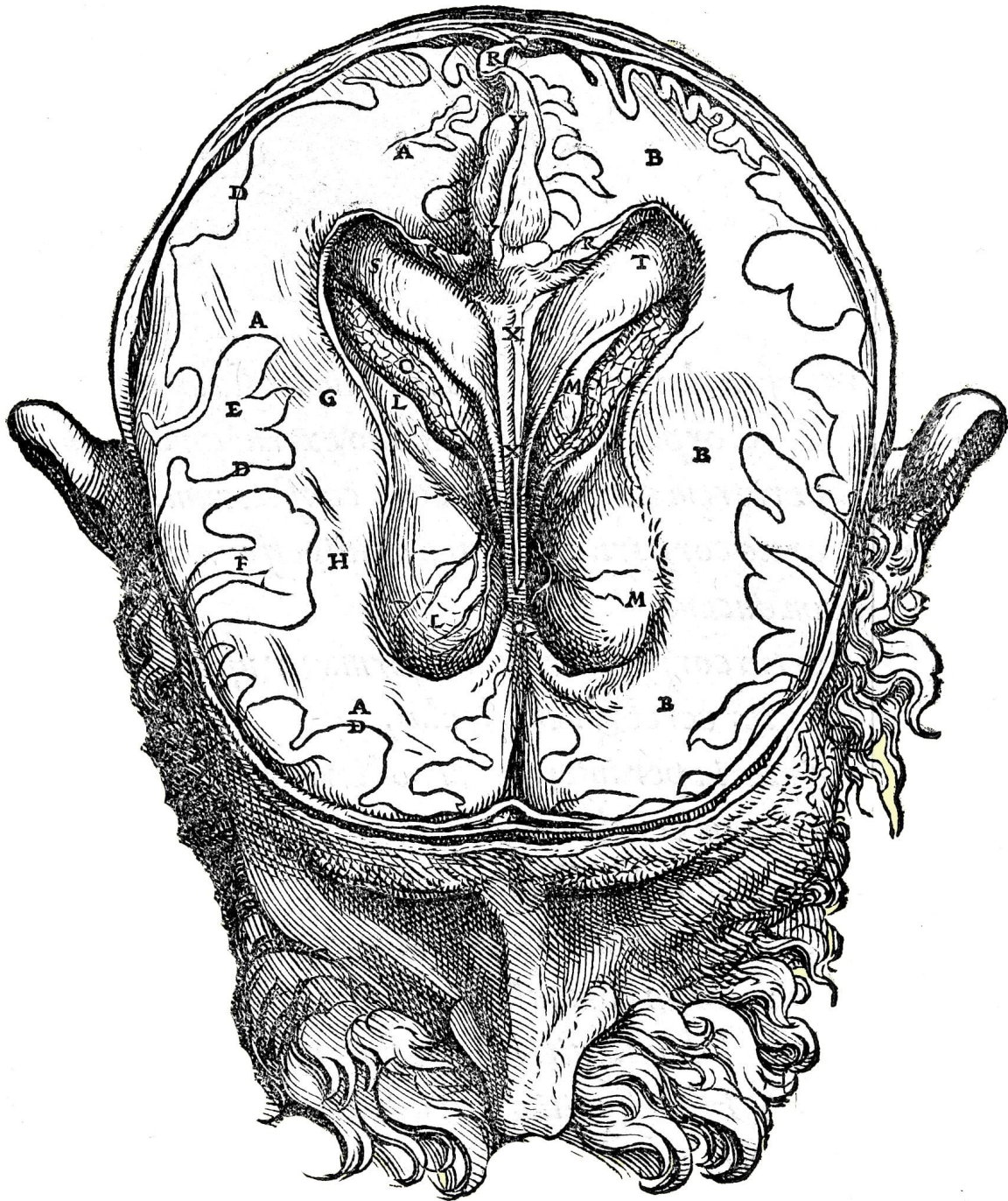
Vesalius got a little carried away in describing this view of the brainstem (Catani & Sandrone, 2015, pp 124-130). He envisioned the upper part of the brainstem as the male perineum, likening the pineal gland (D) to the penis, the superior colliculi (E, G) to the testes and the inferior colliculi (F, H) to the nates (buttocks). He was unclear as to how the cerebellum was attached to the brain stem, noting only the connections to the dorsal spinal cord through the inferior peduncles (I, K).

It is impossible to discern the functions of the brain stem by simply looking at its surface anatomy, and the names assigned to the surface features have little relevance to what goes on beneath. To understand the brainstem one first needs to determine the pathways between the different regions. The anatomy of pathways in the brain stem and cerebrum was determined in the 19th Century by dissection and later by histological studies. The following figure shows an illustration from the first edition of Gray's Anatomy (1858, p 453). This can be compared to a recent analysis of brain pathways obtained by Flavio dell'Acqua (Wellcome website) using Diffusion Tensor Imaging (DTI), a specialized form of



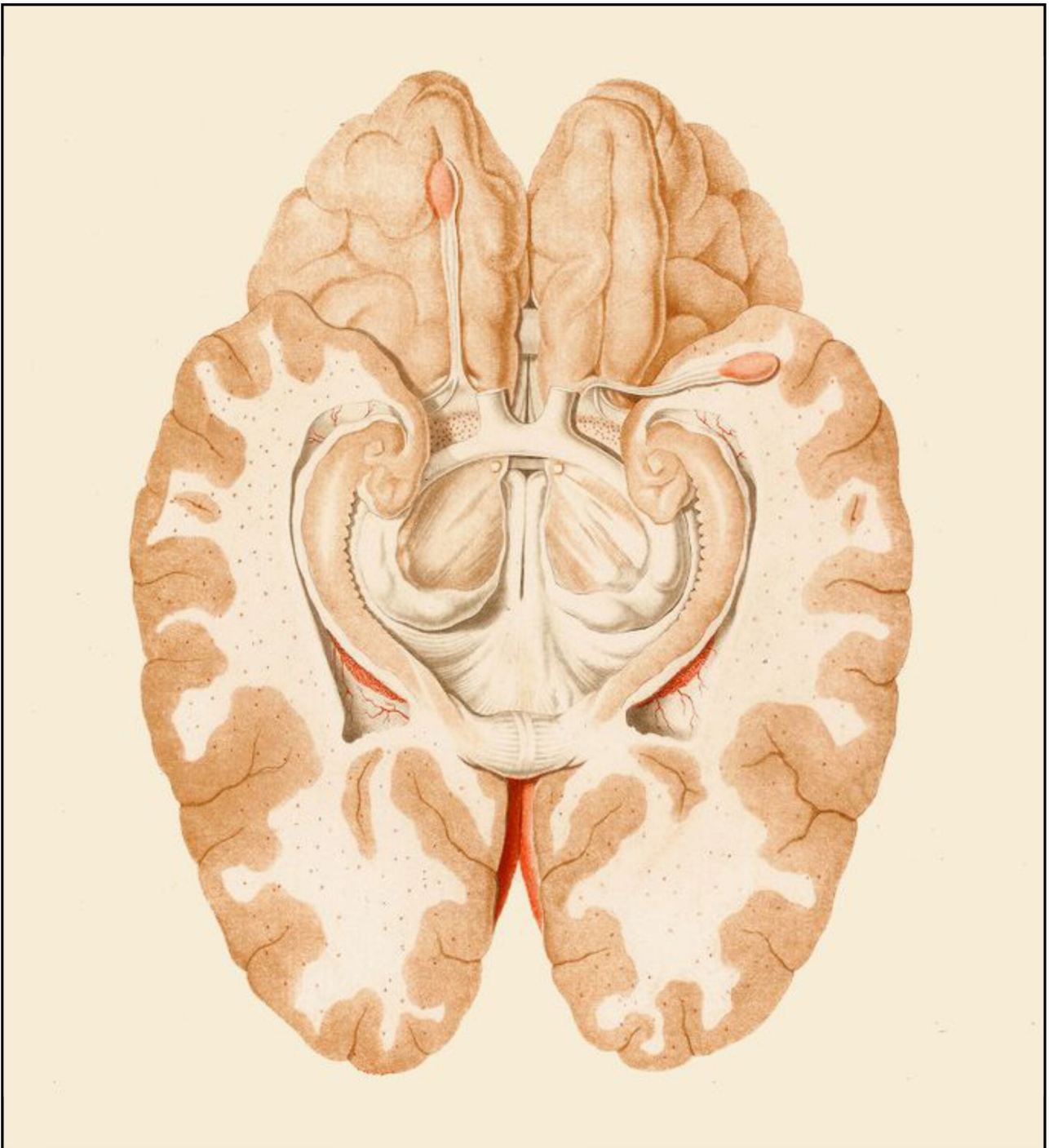
The Brain in Axial Section

Vesalius included in his book several sections through the brain, one of which is shown below. He was mainly concerned with the cerebral ventricles, which were then thought to contain the vital spirits. In the illustration, the anterior portion of the corpus callosum (R) and much of the septum pellucidum (Y) have been bent backward to reveal the lateral ventricles. The lower part of the septum (X) remains. Within the ventricles can be seen the choroid plexus (O). Vesalius distinguished between the gray and white matter but did not otherwise concern himself with the internal structure of the cerebral hemispheres.



The following illustration is from Vicq d'Ayr's 1786 treatise shows a section through the brain at a lower level than in Vesalius' section. The illustration also differs from Vesalius by viewing the section from below rather than from above and by placing the front of the brain at the top. The section shows the hippocampus in the medial wall of the temporal horn of the lateral ventricle. The viewer is charmed by the fact that the left olfactory tract and bulb have been insouciantly turned to lay laterally over the cut surface of the anterior

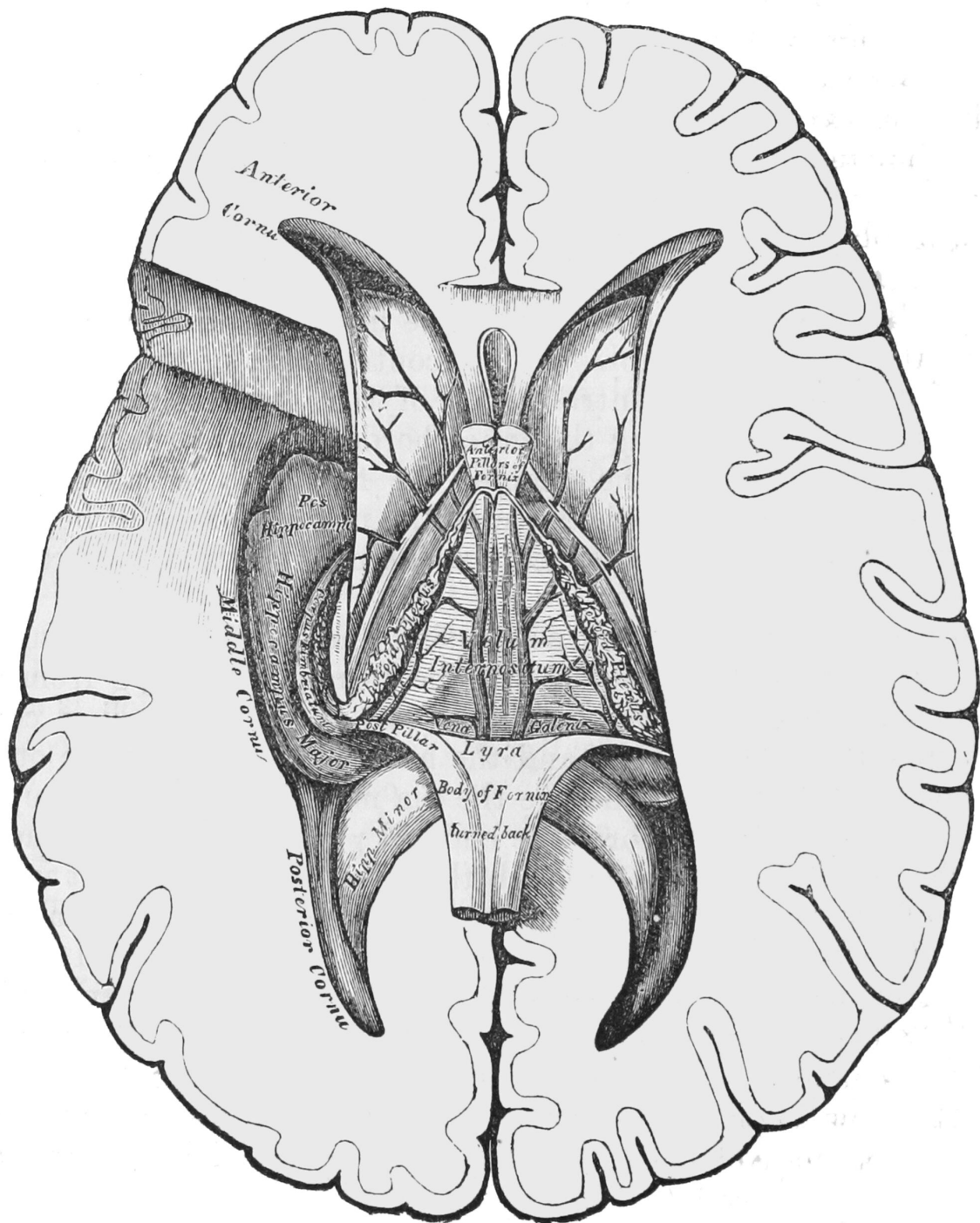
temporal lobe.



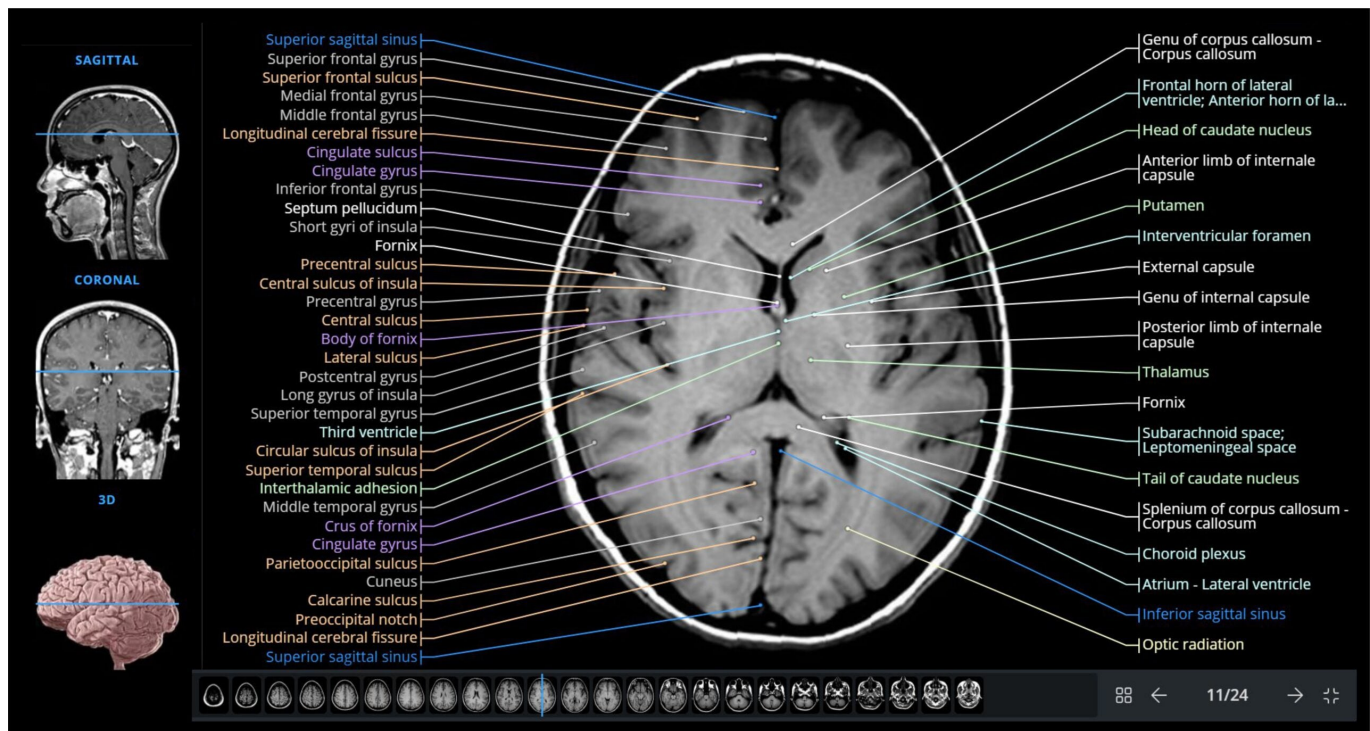
Vicq d'Azyr was fascinated by the structures lying deep within the brain that we now call the limbic system (Parent, 2007). He showed that the major output from the hippocampus was through a bundle of fibers called the fornix that arched around underneath the corpus callosum and then descended to the mammillary body in the hypothalamus. The mammillary bodies

than connected to the anterior nucleus of the thalamus through the mammillo-thalamic tract, often known as the tract of Vicq d'Azyr.

The relations between the Vesalius section and that of Vicq d'Azyr can be understood by studying an ingenious illustration from the first edition of Gray's Anatomy (Gary & Carter, 1858, p 464) The right side of the illustration is similar to the view of Vesalius. On the left side, the section has been dissected more deeply to reveal the hippocampus as in the section by Vicq d'Azyr. The triangular membrane beneath the corpus callosum (*lyra*) has been cut through the descending parts of the fornix and bent backwards. This both reveals the superior aspect of the thalamus and also allows one to imagine the true course of the fornix as it curves upward, forward and then back down. This approach derives from a similar (though less effective) illustration from Vicq d'Azyr (Plate XIV). The drawing by Henry Vandyke Carter is a marvelously lucid (Richardson, 2008). One of Carter's characteristics was to write the name directly on the illustrated structure.



The illustration below shows a modern Magnetic Resonance Image of an axial section of the normal human brain (IMAIOS.com). The section is located between the levels of the Vesalius section and that of Vicq d'Azyr:

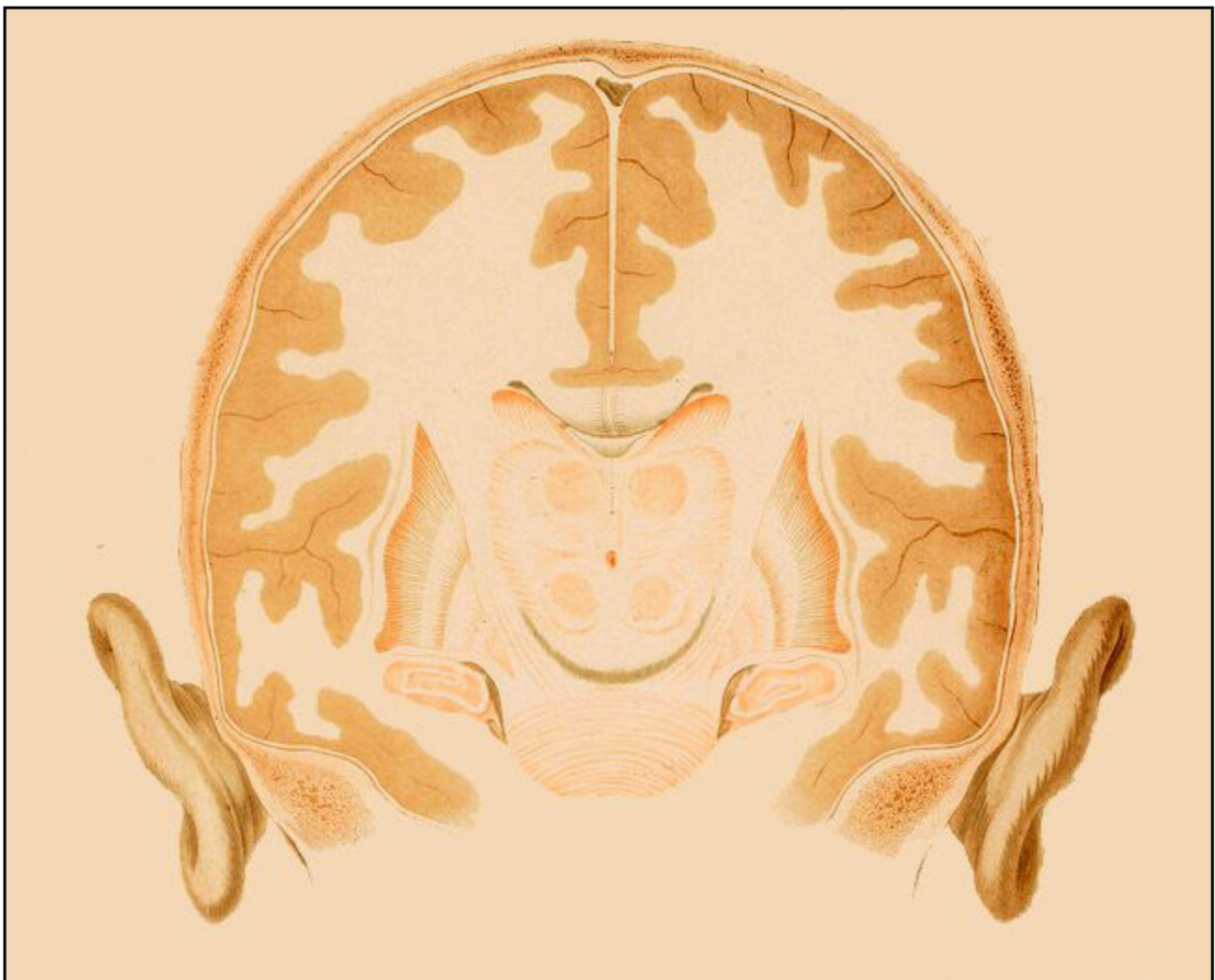


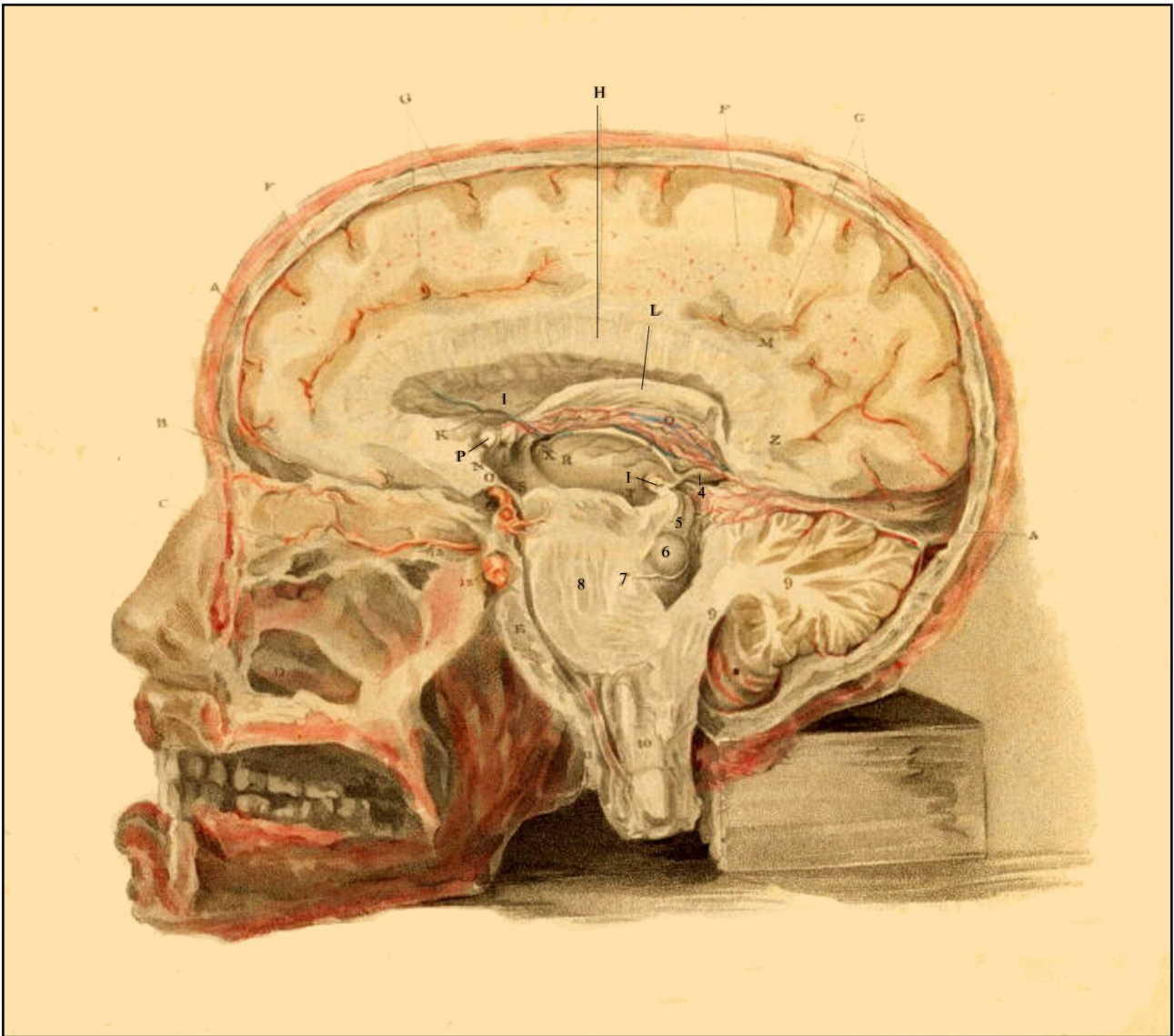
The Brain in Coronal Section

Vicq d'Azyr included several coronal sections of the brain in his 1786 treatise, one of which (Plate XXVI) is shown at the top of the next page. The structure of the nuclei and pathways are only faintly indicated, and the reproduction has been digitally darkened to enhance them. At the top can be seen the corpus callosum connecting the two hemispheres. In the center of the section are the basal ganglia (with their characteristically striped appearance: the corpus striatum) and the thalami. Below the basal ganglia can be seen the hippocampus in cross section.

The structural details of the brain are better seen if the section is stained with chemicals that distinguish the grey and white matter. These only came into use in the late 19th Century. At that time physiologists began to study the connections between regions of the brain using electrical stimulation, and tracts were traced by studying the degenerative effects of focal lesions. At the bottom of the next page is a poster published in 1897 by Adolf von Strümpell, one of the founders of German neurology (Engmann et

al., 2012). The left side of the poster reproduces a stained section, and the right side shows a diagram delineating the nuclei and their connections. The descending fibers of the pyramidal tract are indicated in red: these fibers have their cell bodies in the pre-central cortex and travel through the internal capsule into the cerebral peduncle. Fibers connecting between the hemispheres through the corpus callosum are shown in grey. The green fibers represent the connections between the nuclei of the corpus striatum and the midbrain.

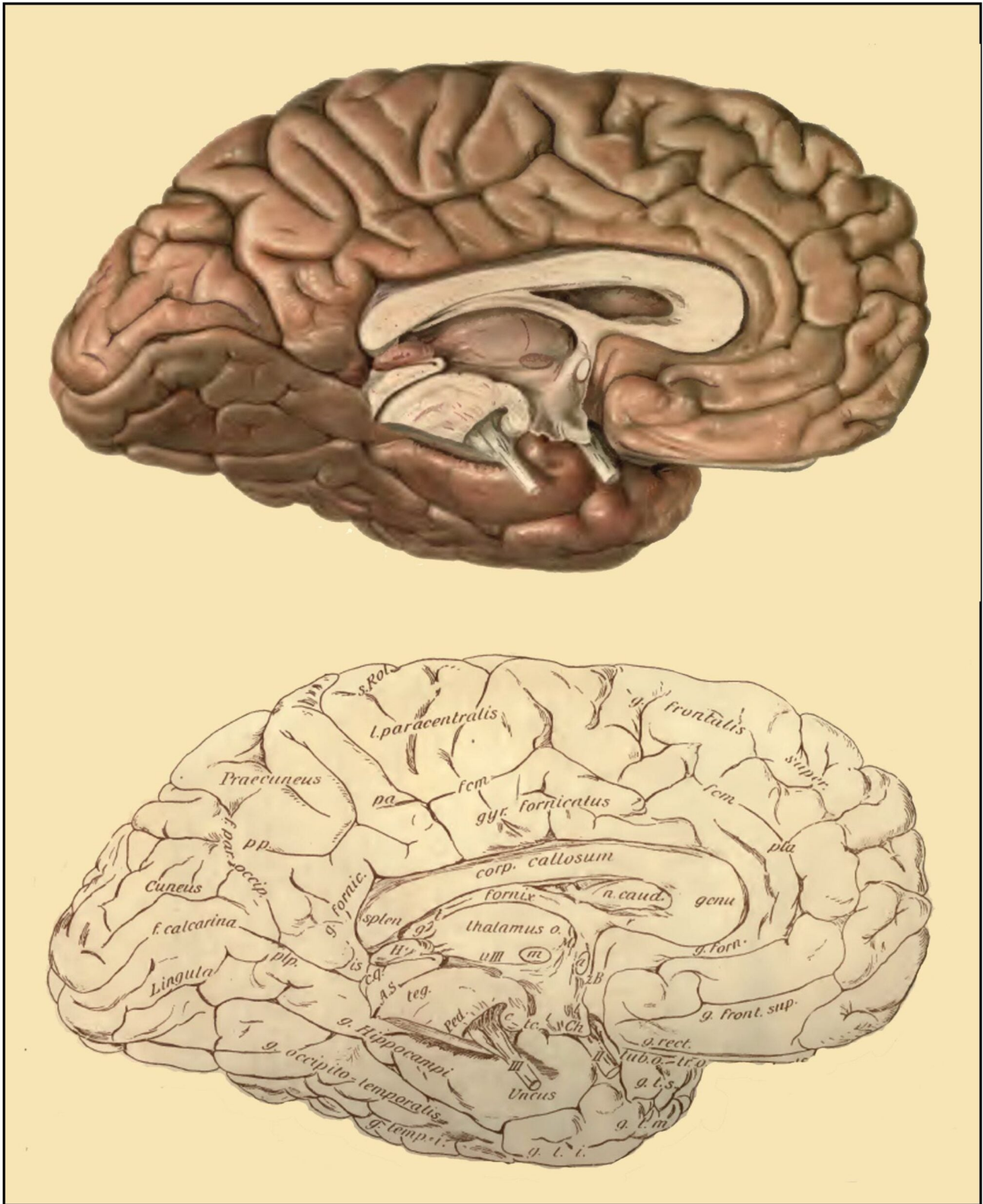




The section shows the corpus callosum (H), above the lateral ventricle (L) through which can be seen the septum pellucidum at the midline, the fornix (L), the anterior commissure (P), the third ventricle (R). Bell also identified the posterior commissure (1), the pineal gland (4), the superior and inferior colliculi (5, 6), (the testes and buttocks of Vesalius), the trochlear nerve (7) and the pontine nuclei (8).

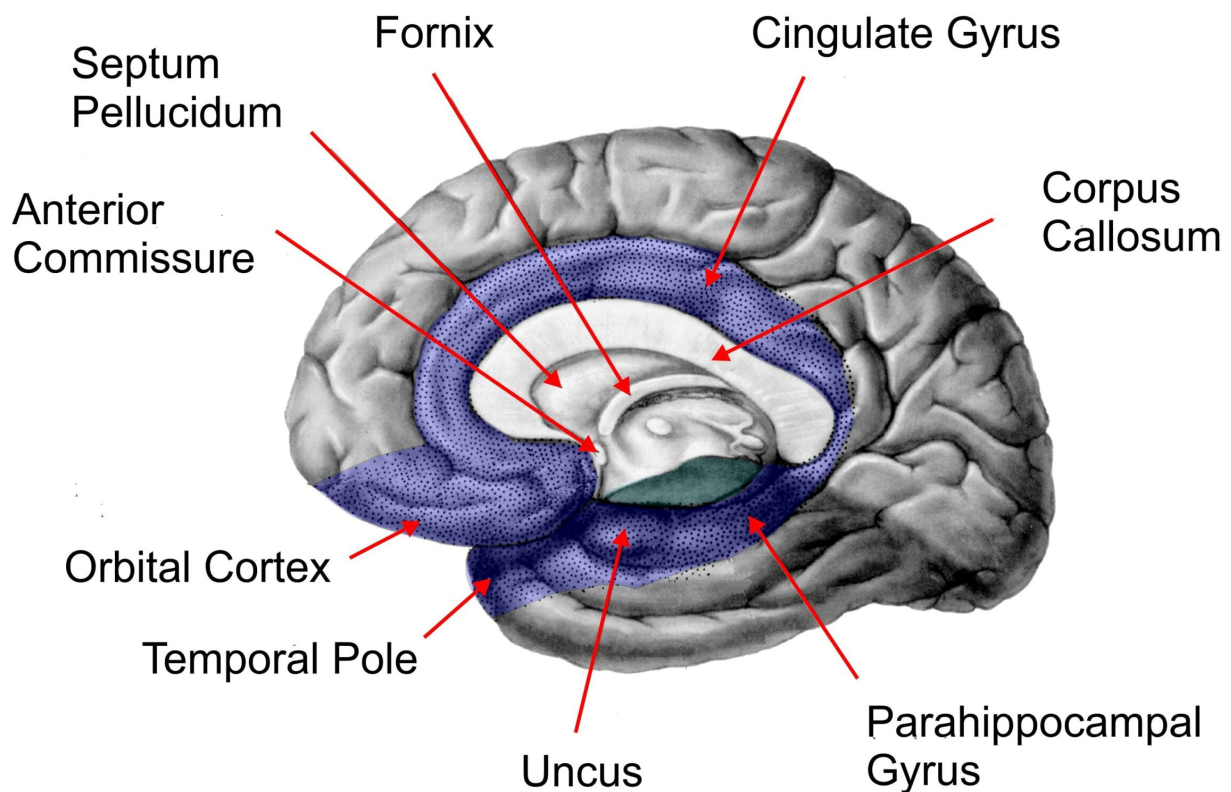
The mesial surface of the forebrain is shown in an illustration on the following page from Christfried Jakob's 1899 *Atlas of the Nervous System* (Plate 4). Jakob, who had served as an assistant to Adolph von Strümpell, produced the first edition of his magnificent atlas in 1895 when he was

only 29 years old. The second edition (1899) was soon translated into English.



Removing the brainstem from the hemisphere allows one to see the mesial surface of the temporal lobes, in particular, the

hippocampal gyrus and the uncus (hook, a term coined by Vicq d'Azyr) at its anterior end. Paul Broca (1878) proposed that the regions of the cerebral hemisphere surrounding the upper end of the brainstem formed an evolutionarily ancient limbic (*limbus*, edge) lobe of the brain (Pessoa & Hof, 2015). This region of the brain appeared to mediate visceral sensations and emotions. The following modern illustration is derived from Martin (2012):

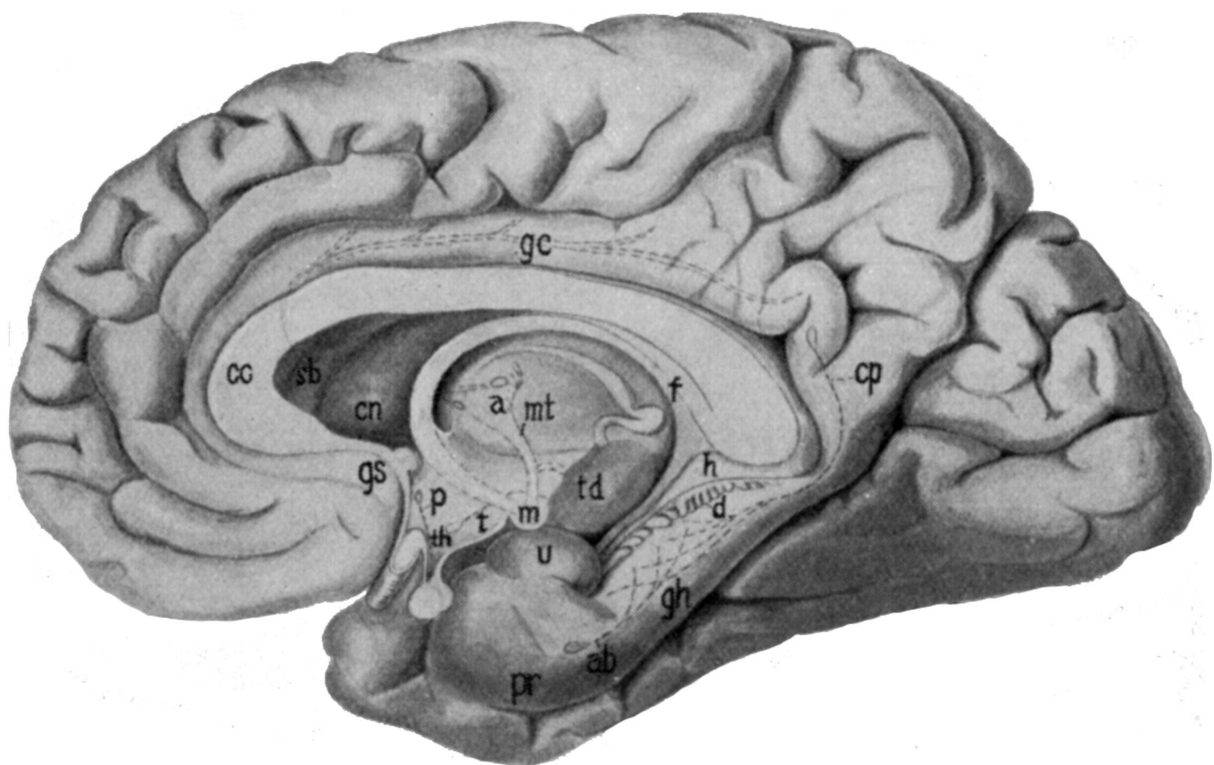


In 1937, the American neuroanatomist James Papez proposed that circuits connecting the regions of the limbic lobe to the hypothalamus mediated the experience of emotions:

The central emotive process of cortical origin may then be conceived as being built up in the hippocampal formation and as being transferred to the mamillary body and thence through the anterior thalamic nuclei to the cortex of the gyrus cinguli. The cortex of the cingular gyrus may be looked on as the receptive region for the experiencing of

emotion as the result of impulses coming from the hypothalamic region, in the same way as the area striata is considered the receptive cortex for photic excitations coming from the retina. Radiation of the emotive process from the gyrus cinguli to other regions in the cerebral cortex would add emotional coloring to psychic processes occurring elsewhere. This circuit would explain how emotion may arise in two ways: as a result of psychic activity and as a consequence of hypothalamic activity.

The following illustration is from his paper. The most important structures in the Papez circuit are the hippocampus (gh), the uncus (u), the fornix (f), the mammillary body (m), the mammillothalamic tract (mt), anterior nucleus of the thalamus (a), the cingulate gyrus (gc), the hypothalamus (p).



Papez's studies were expanded by Paul MacLean (1949) who proposed that these structures composed a "visceral brain." The ideas of Papez and MacLean were originally proposed by

Christfried Jakob in the early years of the 20th Century (Triarhou, 2008; Catani & Sandrone, 2015, pp 104-115). However, he had moved to Buenos Aires, and his papers, published in Spanish, were not as widely read as they should have been.

The connections between the limbic structures and the rest of the brain are far more complex than originally proposed (Kamali et al, 2023; Nieuwenhuys et al., 2008). The amygdala nucleus located in the temporal lobe anterior to the uncus, and the nucleus accumbens in the basal forebrain were not considered in the original formulation of the limbic system.

We still do not fully understand the workings of the limbic system, which we now know to be intrinsically related to memory as well as emotion.

Envoi

All that we experience – our thoughts, feelings, memories, and dreams – are somehow mediated by the brain. Over the years we have developed more and more accurate images of this organ of the mind. We now know the place but do not yet fully understand what happens there.

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Note on the illustrations:

The illustrations were derived from digital representations of

the original publications (listed above). I have digitally enhanced the illustrations as best I could in an attempt to reach what I imagine was their original state.

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Antigone

Sophocles' play *Antigone* tells the story of a young woman who defies the laws of the state in order to do what she believes is right. The issues considered in the play remain as important now as they were almost two and a half millennia ago. Should one follow one's conscience or obey the law? Does justice transcend the law? How does one determine what is right?

In the words of Hegel, Antigone is

one of the most sublime and in every respect most excellent works of art of all time. Everything in this tragedy is logical; the public law of the state is set in conflict over against inner family love and duty to a brother; the woman, Antigone, has the family interest as her 'pathos', Creon, the man, has the welfare of the community as his. (Hegel, 1975, p 464).

The word *pathos* most commonly means the quality of something that evokes pity. However, Hegel uses the word to denote "an inherently justified power over the heart, an essential content of rationality and freedom of will" (p 232). Pathos is the emotional commitment that defines a person – his or her driving passion. Sophocles' play presents the conflict of these passions.

The Theban Myths

In order to understand *Antigone* we need to know what has happened before the play begins. Antigone (441 BCE) was the first of what are now known as Sophocles' three Theban Plays, the others being *Oedipus Tyrannus* (429 BCE) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (409 BCE). The plays were not conceived as a trilogy and *Antigone* was written before the other two. Aeschylus had also written three plays about Thebes but the initial two of these (about *Laius* the father of Oedipus and his version of *Oedipus*) have been lost. Only the third remains: *Seven Against Thebes* (467 BCE), which describes the siege of Thebes by the Argives. *Antigone* begins just after the events described in this play.

From the extant plays we can piece together the mythic narrative that leads to Antigone. Laius, king of Thebes, married to Jocasta, is told by the Delphic Oracle that he can only keep his city safe if he dies childless. After having drunkenly fathered Oedipus, Laius has his son left on Mount Cithaeron to die. However, the boy is found by a shepherd and ultimately adopted as a son by King Polybus of Corinth.

When he comes of age Oedipus is told by the Oracle that he will murder his father and marry his mother. Oedipus flees Corinth to prevent this from happening. On the way to Thebes at a place where three roads meet, he comes upon another traveler. They argue and fight; Oedipus kills the man; the man was Laius.

Oedipus continues on to Thebes. The city has long been plagued by the Sphinx, a monster sent by the gods because of some ancient crime of the Thebans. The Sphinx poses a riddle to all who pass by and devours those that fail to answer correctly: "What goes on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night." The illustration at the right



shows a representation of Oedipus and the Sphinx in a vase from around 500 BCE, now in the Vatican. (The sphinx seems much less monstrous than the legend indicated.) Oedipus solves the riddle – "man, who crawls in infancy, walks as an adult and uses a cane in old age." This releases the city from the monster's power. In gratitude the citizens of Thebes make Oedipus king and grant him the recently bereaved Jocasta as his wife. Oedipus and Jocasta have four children: the boys Polyneikes and Eteokles, and the girls Antigone and Ismene

The gods, displeased at the unrevenged death of Laius, bring a plague down upon Thebes. In order to stop the plague Oedipus searches for his father's murderer. In the course of his investigations he realizes first that he was the killer, and ultimately that Laius was his father and Jocasta his mother. Jocasta hangs herself. Unable to bear the pain of his

knowledge Oedipus blinds himself with Jocasta's brooch pins. Exiled from Thebes he seeks sanctuary in the grove of the Furies at Colonus, a village near Athens. Here Theseus, king of Athens, takes pity on him.

His daughters Ismene and Antigone come to comfort their father in Colonus. In Thebes the sons of Oedipus initially decide to alternate the kingship, but Eteokles then banishes his older brother Polyneikes and becomes sole king of Thebes. Polyneikes visits Oedipus in Colonus to get his blessing for a revolt against his brother, but Oedipus curses both his sons and prophecies that they will die at each other's hand. Oedipus dies. His daughters return to Thebes.

Polyneikes and six other generals raise an army from the rival state of Argos and attack Thebes. The Thebans ultimately defeat the besieging army. Near the end of the siege, Polyneikes and Eteokles fight and kill each other.

The deaths of Polyneikes and Eteokles became a popular motif for sculpture, the illustration below showing a relief on an Etruscan funerary urn from Chiusi (circa 200 BCE).



The following illustration from a 19th century jewel shows a more restrained view of the brothers' deaths.



The Story of Antigone

After the deaths of Polyneikes and Eteokles, Kreon, the brother of Jocasta, becomes king of Thebes. He decrees that Eteokles be given a hero's funeral rites but that the body of the traitor Polyneikes' be left to rot. Anyone who disobeys this ruling will be put to death. Despite the warnings of her sister, Antigone refuses to obey Kreon's commandment and casts earth over Polyneikes' body. The illustration below shows Juliet Binoche in the 2015 production of Antigone at the Barbican in London.



Antigone is caught in the act. The following illustration from a Greek vase (circa 400 BCE) shows Antigone, flanked by two guards holding spears, brought before Kreon.



This is the crucial exchange between the two:

Kreon: Now tell me, not at length, but in brief space,
Knew you the order not to do it?

Antigone:

Yes

I knew it; what should hinder? It was plain.

Kreon: And you made free to overstep my law?

Antigone: Because it was not Zeus who ordered it,
Nor Justice, dweller with the Nether Gods,
Gave such a law to men; nor did I deem
Your ordinance of so much binding force,
As that a mortal man could overbear
The unchangeable unwritten code of Heaven;
This is not of today and yesterday,
But lives forever, having origin
Whence no man knows: whose sanctions I were loath
In Heaven's sight to provoke, fearing the will
Of any man. I knew that I should die –
How otherwise? Even although your voice
Had never so prescribed. And that I die
Before my hour is due, that I count gain.
For one who lives in many ills, as I –
How should he fail to gain by dying? Thus
To me the pain is light, to meet this fate:
But had I borne to leave the body of him
My mother bare unburied, then, indeed,
I might feel pain; but as it is, I cannot:
And if my present actions seems to you
Foolish – 'tis like I am found guilty of folly
At a fool's mouth! (ll 446-470, Young translation)

This is one of the greatest speeches ever spoken on the stage. It comes in four parts. First, Antigone scorns the proclamation of Kreon. Made neither by the gods of Olympus nor by the lords of Hades, this was an "order" rather than a "law." Second, she vaunts the eternal "unwritten code of Heaven" that guides human behavior and that must not be disobeyed. In the third section of the speech, Antigone recognizes that her defiance might bring about her death. However, this will bring relief to one who has already lost father, mother, and two brothers. Finally, she tells Kreon

that she is not the one who is acting foolishly. He who does not understand the code of Heaven is far more fool than she. The following film-clip shows Irene Papas as Antigone and Manos Katrakis as Kreon (Tzavellas, 1961):

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Antigone-and-Creon.mp4>

The chorus is upset by Antigone's defiance. Kreon refuses to grant Antigone mercy and sentences her to be buried alive in a cave. Kreon's son, Haimon, in love with Antigone, pleads with his father, but Kreon remains adamant. In his defense, he states the case for the rule of law:

Obedience is due
To the state's officer in small and great,
Just and unjust commandments; ...
There lives no greater fiend than Anarchy;
She ruins states, turns houses out of doors
Breaks up in rout the embattled soldiery;
While Discipline preserves the multitude
Of the ordered host alive. Therefore it is
We must assist the cause of order.
(ll 665-676, Young translation)

Haimon urges his father not to be so stubborn:

it's no disgrace for a man, even a wise man,
to learn many things and not to be too rigid.
You've seen trees by a raging winter torrent,
how many sway with the flood and salvage every twig,
but not the stubborn—they're ripped out, roots and
all.
Bend or break. The same when a man is sailing:
haul your sheets too taut, never give an inch,
you'll capsize, and go the rest of the voyage
keel up and the rowing-benches under.
(ll 710-717, Fagles translation)

Kreon refuses to listen to his son.

Meanwhile, Antigone bemoans her fate. She accepts that she did what she had to do, but she regrets that she was not able to marry or have children. She does not understand why the gods have not intervened to save one who served them truly. Before she is taken to the cave she asks the Thebans to behold one who has been condemned

τὴν εὐσεβίαν σεβίσασα. (ten eusebian sebisasa) (l 943)

In an act of perfect piety (Carson translation)

For doing reverence where reverence was due. (Brown translation)

The noun *eusebia* means an act of reverence or piety; the verb *sebizo* is to worship or honor. Carson (2015, pp 5-6) remarks about this emphatic conclusion:

Both noun (*eusebia*) and verb (*sebizo*) derive from the Greek root *seb-*, which refers to the awe that radiates from gods to humans and is given back as worship. Everything related to this root has fear in it. But *eusebia* is a fear that moves as devotion – a striving out of this world into another and of another world into this.

Teiresias, the blind seer, tells Kreon that the gods are displeased: they wish Antigone to be freed and Polyneikes properly buried. Kreon orders Antigone's release but she has already killed herself. In grief at her death, Haimon commits suicide. In grief at the death of her son, Kreon's wife Eurydike also commits suicide. Utterly broken, Kreon is led away, his life emptied of any meaning. He is "as a dead man who can still draw breath." (l 1167, Gibbons translation)

The Choral Odes

One of the great attractions of Sophocles' play is the way in which the chorus of Theban elders comment on the action. The play contains six main choral odes. The first is a celebration

of the Theban triumph over the besieging Argives. The most exciting recent translation of this begins

The glories of the world come sharking in all red and gold
we won the war
salvation struts
the streets of sevensated Thebes
(ll 100-102, Carson translation)

The choral odes were sung and danced by a chorus of about fifteen men in the area of the theatre known as the *orchestra* ("place for dancing"). Carl Orff wrote music for the performance of *Antigone* (1949) that suggests how the chorus might have sounded. The following is Orff's music for the introduction of the Chorus and the beginning of this first ode:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/orff-interlude-and-beginning-of-blick-der-sonne.mp3>

The second ode, often known as the *Ode to Man*, considers how wonderful is the creature called man, who can navigate the sea, cultivate the land, tame the animals, build homes for protection against the elements, and find medicine for his ailments. The following translation of the beginning of the ode attempts the rhythms of the Greek:

At many things – wonders
Terrors – we feel awe
But at nothing more
Than at man. This
Being sails the gray-
White sea running before
Winter storm-winds, he
Scuds beneath high
Waves surging over him
On each side
And Gaia, the Earth

Forever undestroyed and
Unwearying, highest of
All the gods, he
Wears away, year
After year as his plows
Cross ceaselessly
Back and forth, turning
Her soil with the
Offspring of horses.
(ll 332-345, Gibbons translation)

The following is Carl Orff's 1949 setting of the opening of the *Ode to Man*. Orff used the words of Hölderlin: *Ungeheuer ist viel. Doch nichts ungeheurer als der Mensch* (Many things are wonderful but nothing more wonderful than man). Orff's music captures the awe at the beginning of the ode, and then gives a driving rendition of human achievements.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Orff-antigonae-ungeheuer-ist-viel-beginning.mp3>

The Greek word used to describe man at the beginning of this famous ode – *deinos* – usually means “extraordinary” or “wonderful.” It also has connotations of the supernatural or uncanny, the unexpectedly clever, or even the monstrous. The word comes from a Proto-Indo-European root *dwei* denoting fear. An example of this root in English is “dinosaur.” *Deinos* has no obvious equivalent in English. The German *ungeheuer* (enormous, terrible, unnatural) used by Hölderlin captures many of its meanings.

The later choral odes in *Antigone* tell how human hopes often come to naught, describe the power of human passion, console Antigone as she is led away to her fate, and at the end of the play praise the gods who teach us wisdom. The following are three modern translations of the final words of the chorus:

Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy,

and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.
The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last
those blows will teach us wisdom
(ll 1347-1353, Fagles' translation)

Wise conduct is the key to happiness
Always rule by the gods and reverence them.
Those who overbear will be brought to grief.
Fate will flail them on its winnowing floor
And in due season teach them to be wise.
(Heaney translation)

There is no happiness, but there can be wisdom.
Revere the gods; revere them always.
When men get proud, they hurl hard words, then suffer
for it.
Let them grow old and take no harm yet: they still get
punished.
It teaches them. It teaches us.
(Paulin translation)

Fagles has the gods teaching all of us, whereas Heaney has them only teaching the proud. Paulin gives both meanings. This section from Orff's *Antigone* is appropriately otherworldly: *Um vieles ist das Denken mehr denn Glückseligkeit*. (Thought is much greater than happiness).

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Orff-antigone-acct-5-ending.mp3>

The following is a clip from the ending to Tzavellas' 1961 film with Manos Katrakis as Kreon and Thodoris Moudis as the leader of the chorus:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Antigone-ending.mp4>

Conflict

The heart of the play is the conflict between Kreon and Antigone. Steiner (1984, pp 231-232) notes that

It has, I believe, been given to only one literary text to express all the principal constants of conflict in the condition of man. These constants are fivefold: the confrontation of men and of women; of age and of youth; of society and of the individual; of the living and the dead; of men and of god(s). The conflicts which come of these five orders of confrontation are not negotiable. Men and women, old and young, the individual and the community or state, the quick and the dead, mortals and immortals, define themselves in the conflictual process of defining each other. Self-definition and the agonistic recognition of 'otherness' (of l'autre) across the threatened boundaries of self, are indissociable. The polarities of masculinity and of femininity, of ageing and of youth, of private autonomy and of social collectivity, of existence and mortality, of the human and the divine, can be crystallized only in adversative terms (whatever the many shades of accommodation between them). To arrive at oneself—the primordial journey—is to come up, polemically, against 'the other'. The boundary-conditions of the human person are those set by gender, by age, by community, by the cut between life and death, and by the potentials of accepted or denied encounter between the existential and the transcendent.

In his assessment of the play, Hegel focused on the conflict between a person's kinship-duties and the allegiance owed to the state (Reidy, 1995; Young 2013, pp 110-139). In his mind *Antigone* represented civilization's necessary change from family-loyalty to state-citizenship. This fits with Hegel's general view of history as a sequence of dialectic conflicts between different world-views. Progress occurs as the two competing ideas become reconciled. The tragedy occurs because neither Antigone nor Kreon can see the other side of the conflict. Antigone feels no duty to the state; Kreon pays no

attention to his family, completely disregarding his son's concerns.

The balance between Antigone and Kreon is what makes *Antigone* a tragedy. Albert Camus (1955/1968, p 301) differentiated tragedy from drama:

the forces confronting each other in tragedy are equally legitimate, equally justified. In melodramas or dramas, on the other hand, only one force is legitimate. In other words, tragedy is ambiguous and drama simple-minded. In the former, each force is at the same time both good and bad. In the latter, one is good and the other evil (which is why, in our day and age, propaganda plays are nothing but the resurrection of melodrama). Antigone is right, but Kreon is not wrong.

In the conflict Antigone and Kreon are very similar in character. Steiner (1984, pp 184-5) points out

Both Kreon and Antigone are *auto-nomists*, human beings who have taken the law into their own keeping. Their respective enunciations of justice are, in the given local case, irreconcilable. But in their obsession with law, they come very close to being mirror-images.

The tragedy evolves because neither Antigone nor Kreon is able to compromise. They are both bloody minded – obstinate to the point of bloodshed. However, Kreon is the more reprehensible: his edict forbidding the burial of Polyneikes is not based on either divine rule or reasoned thought.

Three conflicting forces are at play in *Antigone*. One is the law (*nomos*) of the state (*polis*). The second is the set of "unwritten rules" (*agraptá nomima*) that tell us what is right. The third is fate (*moira*) – the working out of what must necessarily happen. Of these only the first is easy to understand.

Natural Law

Antigone's "unwritten code of Heaven" is often considered the same as the "natural law" – that which we know because it is an essential part of our being (Robinson. 1991; Burns, 2002). Natural law is understood by "conscience" – our intuitive sense of what is right and wrong. Regardless of how we are educated or how our society operates, conscience tends to work similarly: murder and incest are wrong; hospitality and compassion are right. Human history has long realized that the laws promulgated to maintain order in particular societies may come into conflict with an individual's conscience. In these cases, the natural law should generally be paramount. This is the basis of civil disobedience. An unjust law – one that is out of harmony with the natural law – need not be obeyed:

How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. (King, 1963).

However, the natural law is often difficult to determine. It is understood by intuition, and followed by inclination (Maritain, 2001, pp 32-38). So when should conscience take precedence over the law? The laws promulgated by a state should be and often are derived from the natural law. However, they sometimes also exist to entrench the status of the powerful.

The laws or commandments proclaimed in religious scriptures are also related to the natural law. However, even this relationship is complex. On the one hand, the natural law can be conceived as independent of divinity. Hugo Grotius famously stated that we know what is right "even if we concede ... that

there is no God" (*etiamsi daremus ... non esse Deum*). Others, such as Maritain (2001, p 46), propose that the natural law as perceived by man derives from the "eternal law" as perceived by God. Human perception of the divine law is as yet imperfect.

The relation between natural law and nature is also complex. Laws of nature (*phusis*) are deduced from experience of the real world. They portray what is rather than what should be. Such laws can be demonstrated, analyzed and tested. The natural laws for human behavior are understood by intuition. We know what is right but we do not understand how we know. Nor can we demonstrate or test the laws that we follow.

If the natural law is the sum of human dispositions, then we might be able to study it in terms of evolution. Since most of human existence was spent in small bands that hunted and gathered on the African Savannah, many human dispositions to behave in particular ways may have been selected to promote the survival of these small groups. Commandments against murder (other than in self-defense) clearly facilitate group-survival. Edicts against incest decrease the probability of deleterious recessive genes becoming homozygous, and by promoting exogamy (marriage outside of the group) enlarge and strengthen the group.

If natural causes such as evolution are the basis for our morality, perhaps we can determine what is right by what is considered natural. Many people consider homosexuality "unnatural." In the Abrahamic religions, early laws expressly prohibited homosexual relations on pain of death.

If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them."
(*Leviticus 20:13*).

Aquinas argued that homosexuality is unnatural because it does

not lead to procreation, which is the natural purpose of sexual intercourse (*Summa Theologica* II I 94). Yet who or what defines the natural purpose of an act and why should there be only one purpose?

How does Antigone know that she is right to bury her brother, even if her act will entail her death? She is following a “custom” – the Greeks buried their dead. Other cultures cremate their dead, or leave them out to be devoured by carrion-eating birds – “sky burial.” It is difficult to see burying the dead as an absolute requirement of natural law, though some unspecified honoring of the dead seems common to all human cultures.

Fate

The Ancient Greeks attributed much that happens in life to fate. Fate was often personified as three women – the *moirai*. The word derives from *meros*, a part, share or portion. *Clotho* spins the thread of a life; *Lachesis* allots the life to a particular person; and *Atropos* cuts the thread at death. Neither human nor divine intervention can affect the actions of the fates. The following is a print of *The Three Fates* (1558) by Giorgio Ghisi.



Although Antigone has obeyed the unwritten code of heaven, the

gods cannot intervene to save her from her ignominious death. That has been otherwise ordained – it is her fate. After Antigone is led away, the Chorus remarks that such apparently unjust ends have been suffered by others before her. Fate is a terrible thing:

The power of fate is a wonder,
dark, terrible wonder –
neither wealth nor armies
towered walls nor ships
black hulls lashed by the salt
can save us from that force.
(ll 951-954, Fagles' translation)

Fate is described as *deinos* (terrible), the same word that the chorus used to describe man. We are both made and unmade by fate. We should follow the unwritten code of the gods, but doing so will not prevent death. The Fates operate according to some other code. Perhaps they follow necessity rather than justice. Perhaps they follow laws that operate beyond the individual life. The chorus briefly mentions such a possibility: Antigone may be paying for the sins of her father. However, it is possible that the Fates do not follow any code of justice. They may just enforce the physical laws by which the universe operates.

Justice

Justice is the human concept of what is right. Our words related to justice – law, morality, fairness, equity, right, righteousness – overlap in their meanings. The Greeks at the time of Sophocles also had many words (Steiner, 1984, pp 248-251; Nonet, 2006). Precise translations distinguishing these one from another are usually not possible, and the usage of the terms changed over the years.

The Greeks often personified their ideas in terms of gods. *Themis* was a Titaness who personified divine law. Zeus and

Themis had three daughters: *Dike*, law; *Eunomia*, order; and *Eirene*, peace. Dike is customarily represented with a sword and a set of scales for weighing right and wrong (as in the illustrated statue from the Frankfurt Fountain of Justice, an 1887 bronze replacement for the original 1611 stone statue). Another Greek word *dikaiosune* came to mean both a system of justice and the virtue of righteousness (Havelock, 1969). Antigone appeals to Dike as the supporter of the unwritten laws which require the burial of the dead.



The Greeks differentiated *nomos* – the set of socially constructed laws – from *phusis* – the laws underlying the universe. The word *nomima* (laws, regulations, customs) derives from *nomos* but Antigone used it to distinguish the eternal and unwritten laws from human laws. Words do not clearly show us what is right. And they fail to clearly differentiate laws that are given from those that are constructed. Sophocles' tragedy deals in part with our inability to know with certainty what is just.

Modern Adaptations

The story of Antigone has been retold many times (Chancellor, 1979; Steiner, 1984). These versions stress different aspects of the story, supplement the main plot with other events, or place the story in a different time and place. For brevity I shall only consider a few recent adaptations.

(i) Anouilh

During the Nazi occupation of France, Jean Anouilh wrote a version of *Antigone* that was set in modern times. The play was accepted by the censors and produced in Paris in 1944. Anouilh made Kreon a more sympathetic character. He removed from the play the character of Tiresias, who in Sophocles' original play confirmed that Antigone was right. The chorus was no longer a group of Theban citizens who commented on the actions. Rather the chorus acted as a foil between the audience and the actors, describing what was going to happen and why. In this way Anouilh distanced the audience from becoming directly involved in the tragedy.

Anouilh's *Antigone* is more of an existential heroine than a tragic one – she did what she did because she was seeking a reason for her life. As Kreon explains

She wanted to die! None of us was strong enough to persuade her to live. I understand now. She was born to die. She may not have known it herself, but Polynices was only an excuse.

At the end after everyone who had to die has died, Kreon goes on about his work of governing the city. The chorus explains

It's over. Antigone's quiet now, cured of a fever whose name we shall never know. Her work is done. A great, sad peace descends on Thebes, and on the empty palace where Creon will begin to wait for death. Only the guard are left. All that has happened is a matter of indifference to them. None of their business. They go on with their game of cards.

Anouilh's chorus thus appears to attenuate the tragedy. However, Anouilh and his audience most certainly understood the nature of Antigone's fever as *La Résistance*.

How could the German occupation authorities have allowed such a production? Steiner (1984, p. 190) notes that the evaluation of Antigone's story in Germany between the world wars differed

from that in other countries. Frightened by the communist revolts that followed the Great War, Germans saw the need for people like Kreon to maintain the safety of the state. So even if they might have felt that Antigone was right, they also knew that Kreon was not wrong. The great German philosopher Hegel had said that the state must necessarily take precedence over family and personal conscience.

(ii) Brecht

Bertolt Brecht wrote and produced a theatrically stunning version of *Antigone* in Switzerland in 1948. The play was preceded by a prologue set in Berlin in April 1945. This tells the story of how a young deserter from the army came to his sisters' home bringing food for his hungry family. However, he was captured by the police and hung for treason. His body was left hanging as an example to other would-be deserters. The prologue is doubly distanced from the play. As well as being set in the near present, the prologue is narrated to the audience by one of the sisters but acted out by both. The prologue ends with a police officer asking the sisters whether they knew the traitor. The first denies her brother, but the second goes out to cut down his body.

The play then reverts to Thebes. However, the situation differs from that of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Thebes had not been under siege. Rather Kreon had embarked on a war against Argos to gain their iron ore. Eteokles had been brutally killed during this war. Polyneikes saw his older brother being trampled to death, deserted from the futile battle, and was then killed by his own people. The opening choral ode, rather than celebrating the survival of the city, welcomes the wagons of booty and plunder returning from the war.

When Antigone is captured and brought before Kreon, she is bound to a board. Effectively she is carrying a door upon her back. A door she cannot open. The illustration (taken from the Suhrkamp edition of Brecht's play) is from the first



production:

Brecht's Antigone acts politically. She defies Kreon not so much because of any unwritten laws but because she considers him an evil tyrant. She tries unsuccessfully to goad the chorus to join in her defiance. The exchange between Antigone and Kreon is more extended than in Sophocles. After her initial speech of defiance (much the same as in Sophocles), Kreon praises the success of the war, and Antigone continues:

Antigone: The men in power always threaten us with the fall of The State.

It will fall by dissension, devoured by the invaders
and so we give in to you, and give you our power, and bow
down;

and because of this weakness, the city falls and is devoured
by the invaders.

Kreon: Are you accusing me of throwing the city away to be
devoured by the enemy?

Antigone: The city threw herself away by bowing down before
you,
because when a man bows down he can't see what's coming at
him.

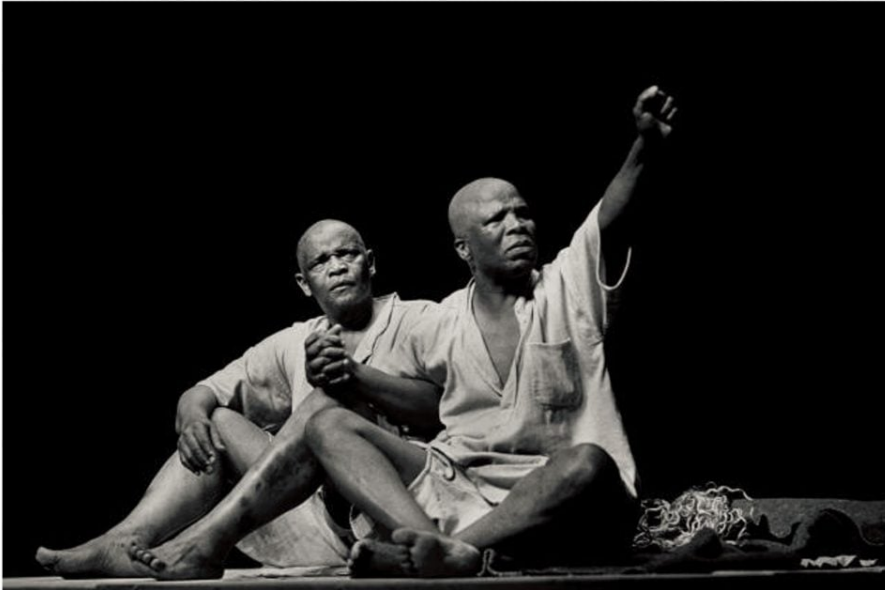
The story plays itself out as in the original Greek, but at the end the city falls to its enemies. The tragedy is that of the people who foolishly followed and who keep following a tyrant. The final words of the chorus are those of despair:

For time is short
and the unknown surrounds us; and it isn't enough
just to live unthinking and happy
and patiently bear oppression
and only learn wisdom in age.

(iii) Fugard

Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona created and produced a play called *The Island* in South Africa in 1973 as a protest against the persecutions of apartheid. The play is set in an unknown prison camp clearly modelled on Robben Island where Nelson Mandela was held. The play follows two cell mates, played by Kani and Ntshona, in prison for the minor offences of belonging to a banned organization and burning an identity card.

In successive scenes, the two men work at digging holes in the sand and filling them up again, rehearse a performance of *Antigone* that they plan to present to the camp, learn that one of them may be released but not the other, pretend to talk on the phone with friends and relatives, and finally present the dramatic confrontation between Kreon and *Antigone*. Below is a photograph showing Ntshona and Kani in the National Theatre revival of the play (2000):



Winston fears that his appearance as a young woman will only cause ridicule, and indeed John bursts into laughter when he first sees him in wig and costume. Yet no one laughs during the final scene when on a makeshift stage Winston tells John

You are only a man Creon. Even as there are laws made by men, so too there are others that come from God. He watches my soul for a transgression even as your spies hide in the bush at night to see who is transgressing your laws. Guilty against God I will not be for any man on this earth.

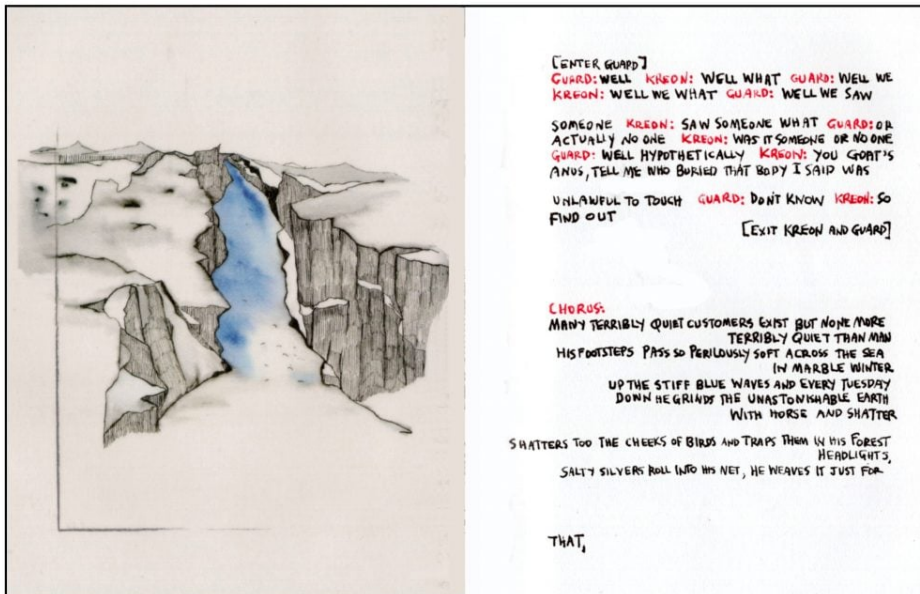
Nelson Mandela was imprisoned in 1962 for conspiring to overthrow the state. He was not released until 1990.

(iv) Carson

In 2012 Anne Carson wrote *Antigonick*, a version of *Antigone* that is more concerned with depicting the ideas and feelings of the play than rendering a literal translation. She added to the play the character of Nick, a surveyor who intermittently and mutely takes measurements of what is happening. Nick stands for the modern viewer who must somehow assess the play coming from a society many hundred years before our own.

The book is presented with a text that is handwritten by

Carson in small black capitals and illustrated with desolate landscapes and surrealistic images by Bianca Stone. These illustrations do not directly relate to the text but add to the book's sense of incomprehensible passion. Below is a representation the book's pages at the beginning of the *Ode to Man*



Man

As can be seen in the ode Carson's choice of words is designed to bring the audience the sense of the original Greek. The word *deinos* becomes "terribly quiet" – a description that captures the connotations of incomprehensibility and menace.

Many terribly quiet customers exist but none more
 terribly quiet than man
 His footsteps pass so perilously soft across the sea
 in marble winter

The following illustration shows three other images from the book, one of a wedding cake in desolation, the second of cutlery flying apart under the influence of a thread (perhaps of fate), and the third of a horse upsetting a feast.



In addition,

Carson sometimes includes commentary in the text. This brings the meaning up to date. In the original play just before Antigone exits to her death, the chorus provides a long discussion of the way in which fate has acted unfairly, quoting various stories from Greek mythology. A modern audience would not know these examples. In *Antigonick* Carson therefore replaces this choral ode by verse that slowly goes from mundane commentary to intense grief:

how is a Greek chorus like a lawyer
they're both in the business of searching for a precedent
finding an analogy
locating a prior example
so as to be able to say
the terrible thing we're witnessing now is
not unique you know it happened before
or something much like it
we're not at a loss how to think about this
we're not without guidance
there is a pattern
we can find an historically parallel case
and file it away under

Antigone buried alive Friday afternoon
compare case histories 7, 17 and 49

now I could dig up theses case histories,
tell you about Danaos and Lykourgos and the sons of Phineas
people locked up in a room or a cave or their own dark mind

it wouldn't help you
it didn't help me
it's Friday afternoon
there goes Antigone to be buried alive
is there
any way
we can say
this is normal
rational
forgivable
or even in the widest definition just
no not really

(v) Zizek

In 2016 Slavoj Zizek, a provocative philosopher and communist, wrote a version of *Antigone* that provides three different endings. This idea of multiple endings came from Tom Tykwer's film *Run Lola Run* (1998). The plot of Zizek's *Antigone* proceeds as in Sophocles until Kreon sentences Antigone to death and is told by Tiresias that he has offended the gods. The first ending then follows as in Sophocles and results in the death of Antigone.

In the second ending the people of Thebes enflamed by the way Kreon offended the gods, rise up and murder him. They set fire to the city. Antigone survives though she is half-mad and does not understand why her simple act of defiance has led to such devastation. The chorus tells her that divine laws are not the ultimate authority:

A society is kept together by the bond of Word,
but the domain of logos, of what can be said,
and this mysterious vortex is what all our endeavours
and struggles are about. Our true fidelity
is to what cannot be said, and the greatest wisdom
is to know when this very fidelity

compels us to break our word, even if this word is the highest immemorial law. This is where you went wrong, Antigone. In sacrificing everything for your law, you lost this law itself.

In the third ending Kreon and Antigone are reconciled, but the citizens of Thebes rise up against their rulers. Kreon is brutally executed because

Much greater evil than a lack of leadership is an unjust leader who creates chaos in his city by the very false order he tries to impose. Such an order is the obscene travesty of the worst anarchy. The people feel this and resist the leader. A true order, on the contrary, creates the space of freedom for all citizens. A really good master doesn't just limit the freedom of his subjects, he gives freedom.

Antigone claims to be on the side of the revolution. But the leader of the people has her executed:

But the excluded don't need sympathy and compassion from the privileged, they don't want others to speak for them, they themselves should speak and articulate their plight. So in speaking for them, you betrayed them even more than your uncle – you deprived them of their voice.

There is no catharsis. The revolution is brutal. The chorus attempts to excuse the horror by repeating the *Ode to Man*

There are many strange and wonderful things but nothing more strangely wonderful than man

But one is left with the nightmare of revolutionaries settling scores by murder. One longs for the simplicity of Sophocles's original wherein Kreon and Antigone were both striving to do what they thought was right. In Zizek no one is right. Violence is the only outcome. Justice is not possible. This is not my idea of *Antigone*. Zizek has not found a way out of the conflict at the basis of the story. Nor has he, a committed communist, portrayed the necessity of revolution as in any way attractive.

Novels

Natalie Haynes has retold the stories of Oedipus and Antigone from the point of view of Jocasta and of Ismene in her novel *The Children of Jocasta* (2017). In Sophocles' play Ismene, Antigone's younger sister, is the only member of Oedipus' family to survive. She initially serves as a foil for her sister, proposing compromise instead of defiance. Later she stands by her sister, though Antigone refuses her support. In Haynes' novel the plot has changed from that of Sophocles' plays, but the story still has its necessary confrontations and reconciliations. The plague plays the role of the Fates.

In *Home Fire* (2018) Kamila Shamsie has reinterpreted the story of *Antigone* in terms of Aneeka a young Englishwoman of Pakistani background. Her brother Parvaiz is recruited to ISIS and serves with the terrorists in Syria. Parvaiz is assassinated in Turkey when he tries to leave ISIS. The English government refuses to allow his corpse to be returned to England for burial, and arranges for it to be sent to Pakistan. Aneeka goes to Pakistan to protest this ruling but ultimately the body, the sister and her fiancé are blown to pieces in a suicide bombing.

The situation envisioned by Shamsie is clearly very possible. A citizen should have the right to be buried in his homeland. This right was recently tested in the case of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of the bombers at the Boston Marathon

(Mendelsohn, 2013). No funeral director or cemetery in Massachusetts would accept his body. After much dispute, a Christian woman in Virginia intervened, and the body was finally buried in an unmarked grave in a small Muslim cemetery in Virginia.

Novels are discursive. They provide us with a wealth of detail, in terms of both things and thoughts. They can discuss what might have been as well as what was. They lack the harsh simplicity of a play.

A Play for All Time

Sophocles' *Antigone* remains as a stirring invocation to do what is right. The world needs its Antigones. This was particularly evident in the days of Hitler (von Klemperer, 1992). Those who resisted Nazism did not succeed in changing their government. Yet they did show their countrymen that there were other ways to live and die than slavishly to follow a leader more concerned with power than with humanity.

Sophocles' play returns time and time again. Whenever governments repress the conscience of their people. World War II generated the *Antigones* of Anouilh, Brecht and Orff. The situation in South Africa brought about Fugard's *The Island*. The situation in Northern Ireland led to Paulin's *The Riot Act*. Judith Malina translated Brecht's *Antigone* while in jail in 1963 because her Living Theatre had run afoul of the US government.

The philosophy of Sophocles combines a respect for human morality and responsibility with an acquiescence to fate (Kitto, 1961, pp 123-127). In this recognition of the role played by fate, Sophocles differs from his predecessor Aeschylus:

The Aeschylean universe is one of august moral laws, infringement of which brings certain doom; the Sophoclean is one in which wrongdoing does indeed work out its own

punishment, but disaster comes, too, without justification; at the most with 'contributory negligence.' (p 126)

Wonderful though man is he cannot control everything. This is most obvious in the fact of death. Yet before we die we can do what we believe to be right. This will not prevent our death but it will pay reverence to whatever ideas of transcendence we have conceived, be it the gods or the good.

We do not understand fate. I have already quoted the final words of Sophocles' chorus – their praise of wisdom. Just before this they make two comments about fate. In reply to Kreon's desire to die the chorus states

That's in the future. We must do what lies before us.
Those who take care of these things will take their care.

And then when Kreon says that he prayed for what he longed for, they answer

Don't pray for anything – for from whatever good
Or ill is destined for mortals, there's no
deliverance.

(Gibbons translation, ll 1334-5, 1337-8)

Sophocles is clear. Do what you think is right. Be open to the ideas of others. Do not expect reward. You will die. Life will carry on.

Texts

Note: the lines for the quotations in this posting are those in the original Greek (Brown edition) and may not fit the lines of the translations.

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