



not trying to weaken tradition, rather to restore it. As a new Galen he wanted to restore the work of the Greek anatomist to a place of honour, and to improve on it where necessary. Although his work was an important fresh step in the way in which scientific work was undertaken, Vesalius wanted above all to get back to the true knowledge that had existed among the Ancients. His anatomical work fully fitted into the paradigm of the new Galenism that was widespread during the Renaissance. Vesalius met with hardly any resistance.

What really made Vesalius a public icon was the way in which he made the connection between scientific culture and the sensitivities that were coming to be seen in the new ordering of society. More clearly than any other work, the *Fabrica* shows the reborn confidence of Western man, the belief in a better, utopian world. With the *Fabrica* Vesalius set scientific research in a much wider social context, a thought that may provide inspiration again to scientists of the 21st century.

GEERT VANPAEMEL

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

## Society

### The Gang of Nivelles

#### Thirty Years on

Thirty years have passed since Belgium was the scene of a series of attacks and cold-blooded murders, mainly carried out at supermarkets. The assailants have never been found. The violent raids took place at branches of the Colruyt chain and (especially) Delhaize supermarkets in 1982, 1983 and 1985, and led to the deaths of 28 people. They culminated in an attack at a Delhaize store in Aalst, in the province of East Flanders, on Saturday, 9 November 1985, in which eight people died. The amount of money stolen in the raids was minimal and certainly out of all proportion to the level of violence used. The case was in danger of expiring, but when the new Belgian government took office it immediately announced that it wished to extend the statute of limitations by ten years.

The impact of the crimes on people's daily lives was enormous, especially in 1985, when a total of 16 people died in attacks in Braine l'Alleud (province of Walloon Brabant), Overijse (Flemish Brabant) and Aalst. All of these attacks took place in Delhaize stores. Following the events in Aalst, the government decided to station armed soldiers in Delhaize stores. According to eyewitnesses, the gang consisted of a tall man ('the Giant'), 'the Killer' (who killed most of the victims) and 'the Old Man', who was usually the driver. There were sometimes several more assailants.

The attacks by the gang coincided with those by the extreme left-wing terrorist group CCC (Cellules Communistes Combattantes). Their attacks cost two people their lives, but the gang members were arrested and sentenced. However, the Gang of Nivelles, named after the Walloon Brabant town that was attacked first, was a puzzle for police. One thing that was clear was that most of the attacks were committed close to motorways, enabling the perpetrators to escape easily out of the country. Some witnesses claim that 'the Killer' died in the final attack in Aalst

after being hit by a police bullet. What is certain is that no further attacks took place after this.

Witnesses came forward who claimed to have seen three men in a Volkswagen Golf, the car used in the attacks, in the Bois de la Houssière, a forest in the province of Walloon Brabant, and two sacks containing ammunition and equipment for breaking and entering were found in a nearby canal. The ammunition matched that used in one of the attacks.

All kinds of theories did the rounds, especially given the meagre hauls from the attacks. Were they common criminals or members of an extreme right-wing organisation, whose sole aim was to spread terror? The Nivelles prosecutor, who was in charge of the investigation for many years, did not believe in the extreme right-wing theory and continued to focus the search on the criminal world. The prosecutor's office in Dendermonde achieved some success with the weapons find, but ultimately the case ended up, under great protest, in Charleroi. The authorities there also believed that pure criminality was behind the attacks. The prosecutor indicted a group of criminals from the Borinage area of the Walloon province of Hainaut, but they were ultimately acquitted.

As the years passed, it became increasingly difficult to catch the perpetrators. All manner of books and articles appeared, suggesting a link with the extreme right. It was thought that the gang might be made up of (former) members of the Belgian Gendarmerie, and that their aim was to destabilise the country. This idea was supported by the military precision with which the attacks were carried out. Specific reference was made to the paramilitary Westland New Post organisation. The suspicions grew when it transpired that members of this organisation were very familiar with the La Houssière forest, even holding shooting practice there. But genuinely convincing evidence was lacking.

Even foreign intelligence agencies - the CIA and Mossad - came into the picture. There was

also talk of extortion because the attacks mainly targeted Delhaize stores. However, Delhaize denied these rumours categorically. A Senate committee was installed to carry out an inquiry into the investigation. Several irregularities in the overall investigation would lead to the setting up of a standing committee (the Vast Comité I) to oversee the police service.

Public confidence in the functioning of the Belgian judicial system suffered enormously, and was not helped by the inability to solve the puzzle. The brutality of the perpetrators and the choice of the victims - simple shoppers in supermarkets - only served to exacerbate the malaise.

Yet the investigation continues. As recently as 2010, an e-fit of a gang member was published. And recently a man was arrested: a former prisoner who had allegedly divulged all manner of details to a fellow prisoner. He was quickly released again, though.

The Gang of Nivelles continues to occupy people's minds, and has even featured in strip cartoons, novels and a film. The next of kin of the victims, however, have long since given up hope that the perpetrators will ever be found. Each year they are invited to meet the investigators, who bring them up to date on the case. But they have lost their faith in the Belgian justice system. Extending the statute of limitations by ten years will do nothing to change that.

JOS BOUVEROUX

*Translated by Julian Ross*