

PETRUS CAMPER
1722-1789

Camper was born on 11 May 1722 in Leiden, the grandson of a physician and son of a protestant minister. He profited from the academic atmosphere in his parental home. He entered grammar school in Leiden in 1731 and soon distinguished himself for his linguistic and mathematical, as well as his manual and artistic skills. When he indicated that he was interested in the study of medicine, his father consulted his friends, Herman Boerhaave and Willem Jacob 's Gravesande, who advised young Camper to study mathematics, physics, anatomy, and chemistry first.

Camper matriculated at the University of Leiden in 1734, where he attended, among others, the lectures of 's Gravesande, Petrus van Musschenboek (both physics), Bernard Siegfried Albinus (anatomy), and Adriaan van Royen (botany). His interest in natural history was stimulated by Johannes Fredericus Gronovius, a well-known naturalist. Camper concluded his studies in 1746 with a double doctorate in philosophy and medicine. Both dissertations dealt with the eye.

After practicing as a physician in Leiden for several years, Camper went to England in 1748, and during his six-month stay there he met practically all the leading scientists in London. In 1749 Camper moved on to Paris, where he met Georges de Buffon. The journey had broadened his outlook and knowledge in many fields of science and medicine. In 1749 Camper was appointed professor of philosophy and of anatomy and surgery at the University of Franeker, and two years later he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of London. In 1755 Camper accepted the chair of anatomy and surgery at Amsterdam's Athenaeum Illustre. A year later he married Johanna Bourboom (1722-1776), widow of one of the wealthiest men in the province of Friesland. In 1758 he was also appointed to the chair of anatomy. In Amsterdam Camper found ample material to study comparative human anatomy, which led to the publication of the renowned *Demonstrationum anatomico-pathologicarum* (1760-1762).

Upon his resignation in Amsterdam and return to Friesland, in 1761, Camper became involved in local politics. For three years he was an active member of the States of Friesland, but he continued his zoological research, making a special study of the hearing of fishes. Other publications dealt with agricultural problems, liver-rot in cattle and sheep, infantile hernia, and educational problems. In 1763 Cam-

per accepted the post of professor in theoretical medicine, anatomy, surgery and botany at the University of Groningen, delivering an inaugural lecture on the analogy between animals and plants. During his ten years at Groningen, Camper's main concern was medicine, which led to publications on small-pox inoculation and comparative physiology. Further, he worked and published on a variety of topics, such as rinder pest, the best method of making anatomical drawings, fossil elephants, and human races. His anatomical researches on animals caused him to give a series of widely acclaimed demonstration lectures, which were unique in the Netherlands at that time. Camper's eloquence and the didactic usefulness of his drawings attracted many students.

In 1773 Camper ended his academic career and returned to his Frisian estate. He entered again into Frisian politics and became a supporter of the Orangist party of prince William V. As representative of the States of Friesland to the States-General, he often resided in The Hague. There he studied the famous natural history collection and menagerie of the stadholder, William V, who made him chairman of the Council of State. In Friesland he became acting burgo-master of the city of Workum in 1782 and was actively involved in discussions on the maintenance of dykes.

Camper's later scientific work was in the fields of palaeontology, and comparative anatomy, especially of the elephant, the rhinoceros, the orang utan, and various species of whales. His well-known study on the facial angle in human beings contributed to the foundation of physical anthropology. Camper had become a prominent physician as well, with a high reputation in the fields of surgery and obstetrics, which he placed on a sound anatomical basis. In 1785 he was the second Dutchman after Boerhaave to become an 'associé étranger' of the Académie des Sciences in Paris.

Camper died on 7 April 1789 in The Hague. He was one of the foremost and famous Dutch scientists of the time. He was a member of a number of learned societies and had contacts with many colleagues in other European countries.

Primary works

Poggendorff, vol. 1, 368; a complete bibliography of Camper's works is to be found in Visser, *Camper*, 178-199 (see below); a bibliography of primary and secondary literature in Meijer, *Camper*, 400-488 (see below).

Secondary sources

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DMB, 320-324; G.A. Lindeboom, in: *DSB*, vol. 3, 37-38; J. Sasse Azn, in: *NNBW*, vol. 1, 552-556.

[L.C.P.]