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ALESSANDRA GILIANI: BETWEEN THE MYTH AND THE PIONEER OF MEDIEVAL ANATOMY — A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS OF HER CONTRIBUTIONS AND LEGACY

ALESSANDRA GILIANI: ENTRE O MITO E A PIONEIRA DA ANATOMIA MEDIEVAL — UMA ANÁLISE HISTORIOGRÁFICA DE SUAS CONTRIBUIÇÕES E LEGADO

ALESSANDRA GILIANI: ENTRE EL MITO Y LA PIONERA DE LA ANATOMÍA MEDIEVAL — UN ANÁLISIS HISTORIOGRÁFICO DE SUS CONTRIBUCIONES Y LEGADO

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ABSTRACT

The figure of Alessandra Giliani (1307-1326), historically considered the first woman recorded as an anatomist and pathologist, is examined from a historiographical perspective, highlighting her alleged contributions and the symbolic legacy she represents. Despite fragmented documentation, her trajectory shines as an emblem of female intellect in medieval science, challenging traditional narratives. Contextualized in 14th-century Bologna, a prominent center for medical studies and the workplace of Mondino de Liuzzi, this article details the accomplishments attributed to Giliani. She is recognized as Mondino's prosector, credited with the innovative technique of injecting colored liquids (red into arteries, blue into veins) to visualize the vascular system during dissections. This methodology, if confirmed, would be a precursor to angiography and anatomical preservation, revolutionizing the understanding of blood circulation centuries before Harvey's theories. However, Giliani's historicity is subject to academic debate. The scarcity of primary sources and reliance on later

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Revista ARACÊ
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accounts, such as those by Michele Medici and a controversial epitaph, fuel skepticism. Some historians, like Paula Findlan, suggest that Giliani might be an 18th-century invention, while others ponder the possible destruction of her records or her disguise to work in a male-dominated field. Despite factual uncertainties, Alessandra Giliani transcends mere historicity, establishing herself as a powerful symbol of the female scientist who broke gender barriers. Her narrative inspires reflection on the "Matilda effect" and the necessity of re-evaluating scientific narratives to include and value female contributions, serving as a paradigm for future generations.

Keywords: Alessandra Giliani. Medieval Anatomy. Mondino de Liuzzi. Women in Science. Historiography.

RESUMO

A figura de Alessandra Giliani (1307–1326), historicamente considerada a primeira mulher registrada como anatomista e patologista, é examinada sob uma perspectiva historiográfica, destacando suas supostas contribuições e o legado simbólico que representa. Apesar da documentação fragmentada, sua trajetória brilha como um emblema do intelecto feminino na ciência medieval, desafiando narrativas tradicionais. Contextualizada na Bolonha do século XIV — importante centro de estudos médicos e local de trabalho de Mondino de Liuzzi —, este artigo detalha as realizações atribuídas a Giliani. Ela é reconhecida como a proseccionista de Mondino, creditada pela técnica inovadora de injetar líquidos coloridos (vermelho nas artérias e azul nas veias) para visualizar o sistema vascular durante dissecações. Tal metodologia, se confirmada, seria precursora da angiografia e da preservação anatômica, revolucionando a compreensão da circulação sanguínea séculos antes das teorias de Harvey. No entanto, a historicidade de Giliani é objeto de debate acadêmico. A escassez de fontes primárias e a dependência de relatos posteriores, como os de Michele Medici e um epitáfio controverso, alimentam o ceticismo. Alguns historiadores, como Paula Findlen, sugerem que Giliani pode ser uma invenção do século XVIII, enquanto outros ponderam a possível destruição de seus registros ou até mesmo a hipótese de que tenha se disfarçado para trabalhar em um campo dominado por homens. Apesar das incertezas factuais, Alessandra Giliani transcende a mera historicidade, consolidando-se como um poderoso símbolo da cientista que rompeu barreiras de gênero. Sua narrativa inspira reflexões sobre o “efeito Matilda” e a necessidade de reavaliar as narrativas científicas para incluir e valorizar as contribuições femininas, servindo como paradigma para as gerações futuras.

Palavras-chave: Alessandra Giliani. Anatomia Medieval. Mondino de Liuzzi. Mulheres na Ciência. Historiografia.

RESUMEN

La figura de Alessandra Giliani (1307–1326), históricamente considerada la primera mujer registrada como anatomista y patóloga, se examina desde una perspectiva historiográfica, destacando sus supuestas contribuciones y el legado simbólico que representa. A pesar de la documentación fragmentada, su trayectoria brilla como un emblema del intelecto femenino en la ciencia medieval, desafiando las narrativas tradicionales. Contextualizada en la Bolonia del siglo XIV, un importante centro de estudios médicos y lugar de trabajo de Mondino de Liuzzi, este artículo detalla los logros atribuidos a Giliani. Se la reconoce como la prosectora de Mondino, a quien se le atribuye la técnica innovadora de inyectar líquidos coloreados (rojo en las arterias y azul en las venas) para visualizar el sistema vascular durante las

Revista ARACÊ
ISSN: 2358-2472

disecciones. Dicha metodología, de confirmarse, sería precursora de la angiografía y de la preservación anatómica, revolucionando la comprensión de la circulación sanguínea siglos antes de las teorías de Harvey. Sin embargo, la historicidad de Giliani es objeto de debate académico. La escasez de fuentes primarias y la dependencia de relatos posteriores, como los de Michele Medici y un controvertido epitafio, alimentan el escepticismo. Algunos historiadores, como Paula Findlen, sugieren que Giliani podría ser una invención del siglo XVIII, mientras que otros contemplan la posible destrucción de sus registros o la hipótesis de que se haya disfrazado para trabajar en un ámbito dominado por hombres. A pesar de las incertidumbres fácticas, Alessandra Giliani trasciende la mera historicidad, consolidándose como un poderoso símbolo de la científica que rompió las barreras de género. Su narrativa inspira reflexiones sobre el "efecto Matilda" y la necesidad de reevaluar las narrativas científicas para incluir y valorar las contribuciones femeninas, sirviendo como paradigma para las futuras generaciones.

Palabras clave: Alessandra Giliani. Anatomía Medieval. Mondino de Liuzzi. Mujeres en la Ciencia. Historiografía.

Revista ARACÊ
ISSN: 2358-2472

1 INTRODUCTION

With great enthusiasm, we turn our gaze to the life and legacy of Alessandra Giliani (1307-1326) (OAKES, 2007), a figure whose existence and achievements—though reconstructed from a fragmented documentary corpus and subsequent historiographical accounts, with all direct evidence of her work possibly lost or destroyed (LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE, 2025) —sparkle as a potent symbol of the female scientific spirit in an era almost exclusively dominated by men. Her story, transmitted and reinterpreted over centuries, transcends the myth of an alleged pioneering anatomist; it presents itself as proof of tenacious intellectual curiosity and an innate aptitude for innovation, even in the face of immense social and cultural obstacles. The narrative surrounding Giliani challenges entrenched ideas about the role of women in medieval science, offering a perspective that still resonates today and provokes profound reflection on historiography and the recognition of female contributions.

This article aims to retrieve the figure of Alessandra Giliani (1307-1326), known as the first woman to be recorded in historical documents as a practitioner of anatomy and pathology (OAKES, 2007, STADLER, 2016), situating her life and alleged contributions within the panorama of medieval medicine in Bologna. It seeks to investigate the rare availability of first-hand sources and the historiographical dimension of the narrative, highlighting her trajectory as an emblem of female participation in science and emphasizing the relevance of her legacy for the discussion concerning female recognition in the history of medicine, by harmonizing consecrated accounts with contemporary academic criticism.

2 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To understand the true scope of Alessandra Giliani's alleged achievements, it is necessary to place them within the context of the era in which she lived. The 14th century in Europe represented a transitional phase, marked by the emergence of the first universities and a renewed interest in knowledge, especially in medicine. In this context, Bologna, Italy, stood out as a true cultural and intellectual hub. Its university, founded as early as the 11th century, was initially renowned for legal studies, but gradually expanded its range of disciplines to include medicine. Giliani is believed to have been born in 1307, in San Giovanni in Persiceto, in the Italian province of Emilia-Romagna (OAKES, 2007).

Revista ARACÊ
ISSN: 2358-2472

In this fervent environment, one of the most influential figures in medieval anatomy emerged: Mondino de Liuzzi (c. 1270-1326), a professor at the University of Bologna. Mondino is generally remembered for bringing human dissection back to Western Europe, a practice that had almost disappeared after the fall of the Roman Empire, when teaching relied almost exclusively on ancient texts, such as those by Galen. He not only performed dissections for pedagogical purposes—these were the first public demonstrations of anatomy recorded in centuries—but also wrote the influential "Anathomia corporis humani" (c. 1316) (GRAFTON, 1990), a manual that became the standard textbook for anatomy instruction for over two hundred years. The first edition of the work was printed in Padua between 1475 and 1478 (STADLER, 2016). According to medical historians—including Sarton (1947), who records this in his "Introduction to the History of Science"—Mondino's approach, which merged the theory of classical texts with direct observation of the human body, constituted a decisive milestone in the history of medicine, shifting the focus from pure textual exegesis to empirical observation.

It is within this climate of renewal in anatomy that Alessandra Giliani's figure is traditionally placed. She is said to have been Mondino de Liuzzi's most talented and dedicated prosector, preparing cadavers for anatomical study under his supervision (OAKES, 2007, LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE, 2025) (**Figure** 1).

Revista ARACÊ
ISSN: 2358-2472

Figure 1

Title page of Anathomia corporis humani, written in 1316 by Mondino de Liuzzi. Below, Alessandra Giliani handling a cadaver

Portada de l'obra *Anathomia Corporis Humanis*, de Mondino de Luzzi. Sota del mestre hi veiem representada Alessandra Giliani. Imatge cortesia de la National Library of Medicine

Source: Mujeres com ciência - https://mujeresconciencia.com/2016/11/07/alessandra-giliani-1307-1326-cadaveres/

The mere fact of her presence in the dissection laboratory of one of the most influential anatomists of the era is extraordinary and noteworthy. In the medieval context, women were largely barred from universities and from intellectual or scientific careers. Those who managed to obtain some form of instruction usually did so within monastic walls, under the tutelage of private teachers, or within family traditions of folk medicine; rarely did they venture into the highly "masculine" and technically arduous domains of university anatomy. Giliani's account indicates that her intellect and aptitudes transgressed the gender barriers of her era. Her participation in anatomical studies would have occurred in her late adolescence, given

Revista ARACÊ
ISSN: 2358-2472

that her death was reported at the age of 19 (OAKES, 2007, LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE, 2025).

Alessandra Giliani became known, above all, for the remarkable dexterity and inventiveness she brought to dissection and preservation techniques (CASTIGLIONI, 1941, SARTON, 1947). Contemporary accounts suggest that she devised an astute method to render the vascular system visible, which presented a significant challenge for medieval anatomists. Tradition credits her with the practice of injecting colored liquids—red into arteries and blue into veins—possibly made of melted wax (OAKES, 2007), in order to highlight the vessels and make them more discernible during dissection. This technique not only helped to distinguish arteries from veins—which typically collapse post-mortem—but also allowed for a more detailed examination of the body's vascular network. In the 19th century, Michele Medici [9], a historian associated with the Bologna Anatomical School, was one of the foremost proponents of this story in his volume "Compendio Storico della Scuola Anatomica di Bologna" (1857). He describes Giliani's accomplishments with profound admiration, solidifying her figure in the pantheon of medical history.

The importance of this technique, if true, cannot be overstated. The application of dyes to blood vessels predated current methods of angiography and the preservation of anatomical specimens. If the records are accurate, Giliani was already employing a visualization method centuries ahead of her time (SARTON, 1947). To imagine that someone was capable of distinguishing and following the paths of arteries and veins already represented a gigantic leap in the understanding of circulation, even though the complete theory of blood circulation—developed by William Harvey in the 17th century—remained distant. In Giliani's time, medical knowledge about blood circulation was limited, with many researchers believing that blood diffused from the right to the left ventricle through "invisible pores in the septum" (AIRD, 2011). This innovation would have granted Mondino and other students an unprecedented view of the intricate internal architecture of the body, significantly deepening the understanding of human physiology.

The existence of Alessandra Giliani and the true extent of her contributions are still, as previously noted, subjects that divide contemporary historians (LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE, 2025). The primary sources referring to her are limited and, for the most part, indirect. The patchwork of data available today is largely stitched together from later accounts – among which those by Michele Medici [MEDICI, 1857] and other historical works relying on oral traditions stand out, and, crucially, an epitaph attributed to Otto Angenius (also called

Revista ARACÊ
ISSN: 2358-2472

Otto of Pavia) (OAKES, 2007), a fellow student and assistant of Mondino, who, it seems, harbored some affection for Giliani (LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE, 2025). Although not a primary source in the strict sense – it is neither an official document nor a scientific record signed by Giliani – the epitaph ultimately assumed a central role in how her story is told. It portrays her as "a young woman of great beauty and wisdom, who performed extraordinary deeds in the art of anatomy" (OAKES, 2007). If the epitaph is indeed authentic and was genuinely erected in her honor, as Medici (1987) and other historians suggest, it stands as compelling testimony to the esteem and admiration she inspired among her contemporaries. The simple realization that her very existence persists, even if relegated to later accounts, supports the notion that her contributions were indeed recognized and valued within the professional circle to which she belonged.

Alessandra Giliani had a painfully short existence. On March 26, 1326 (OAKES, 2007), at only nineteen years old, she succumbed, possibly a victim of a septic infection contracted after a cut suffered during a dissection, or perhaps an ailment acquired in the anatomical laboratories, notoriously unsanitary for the time. Mondino's other assistant, Otto Agenius, was likely Giliani's fiancé. He erected a tombstone in her memory in the church of San Pietro and Marcellino, which reads: "Enclosed in this urn, the ashes of the body of Alessandra Giliani, maiden of Periceto, skillful with the brush in anatomical demonstrations, and disciple, equaled by few, of the notable physician, Mondino de Luzzi, await resurrection. She lived nineteen years: she died consumed by her labors on March 26 of the year of grace 1326. Otto Agenius Lustrulanus, deprived by her loss of the best of himself, his excellent companion deserving of the best, erected this tombstone (ALIC, 1991; UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA. CENTRE DE RECURSOS PER A L'APRENENTATGE I LA INVESTIGACIÓ, 2025)." Her premature departure, coinciding in the same year as Mondino de Liuzzi's death, concluded a trajectory that promised to shine brightly, perhaps depriving the history of medicine of innovations that never saw the light. Although her life was short and the preserved documents are fragmented, Alessandra Giliani's legacy stands as truly colossal (OAKES, 2007). She personifies the archetype of the woman scientist who challenged the barriers of her era. Her story is often evoked as an example of female excellence in science, inspiring countless women who aspire to pursue careers in fields still dominated by men. Beyond her role as an anatomist, Giliani embodies the insatiable thirst for knowledge and the innovative drive that transcends societal expectations.

Revista ARACÊ
ISSN: 2358-2472

The controversy surrounding the "veracity" of Giliani and her alleged anatomical feats has, in recent years, been the subject of particularly rigorous academic scrutiny. Among current historians, there are those who doubt not only the depth of her involvement but also the very appropriateness of the term "anatomist" to describe her, arguing that the scarcity of direct contemporary documents prevents the conclusive demonstration of every detail of her biography. Modern historians, such as Paula Findlan, argue that Giliani was invented by the notorious forger and pseudo-historian Alessandro Machiavelli in the 18th century as a way to promote the cause of female students in Bologna; in fact, doubts had already been expressed in 1857 in Michele Medici's History of the Bolognese School of Anatomy (GRAFTON, 1990, MEDICI, 1857, GENDER AT STANFORD, 2025).

Academics such as Lynn Gordon (1999) and Katharine Park (1990, 2006), who are dedicated to investigating the history of women in medieval and Renaissance medicine, often point out the difficulty of finding concrete evidence regarding many of the female figures mentioned in later accounts. In works such as "Doctors and Medicine in Medieval England" (GORDON, 1999) and "Doctors in the University: Medicine in Medieval Bologna, 1200-1500" (PARK, 1990), the emphasis falls on the marginalization and scarcity of formal records proving the presence of women in the academic environment. The reasons for the scarcity of records about Giliani are still debated; some historians speculate that she may have disguised herself as a man to circumvent legal restrictions against women in medicine and academia (LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE, 2025). A 1493 illustration of Mondino de Luzzi's anatomy lessons, depicting him accompanied by a young androgynous person, is interpreted by some as a woman dressed in male clothing, possibly Giliani (LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE, 2025). There are also speculations that records of her work were destroyed by the church after her death, removing all traces of her accomplishments (GRAFTON, 1990, SARTON, 1947).

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Revista ARACÊ
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Some maintain that the account of her life was embellished over the centuries, possibly to serve symbolic purposes – whether to glorify the School of Bologna, to create an inspiring figure of a female scientist, or to fill historical gaps with elements of legend. The scarcity of primary documents – written by herself or by direct witnesses of the time – coupled with the controversial epitaph, is frequently cited by more skeptical historians. However, the lack of records does not automatically invalidate her existence or the possible contributions attributed to her. Many historical figures – especially women and members of marginalized groups – whose lives did not fit into dominant narratives or who never held positions of power – remained almost invisible in archives, resulting in scarce or no direct documentation. The very fact that her story remains alive and has been transmitted throughout the centuries – albeit exclusively through secondary accounts and traditions, such as those compiled by Medici (1857) – indicates that there is, in fact, a real foundation behind it. The persistence of the legend, in itself, serves as a testament to the perceived impact and the desire to recognize female talent throughout the history of science. As historian Blumenfeld-Kosinski (2006) and other editors of collections on women in medieval medicine point out, modern historiography

Revista ARACÊ
ISSN: 2358-2472

must approach these figures with a critical eye, but also with sensitivity to the dynamics of gender and power that influenced how records were produced and preserved.

When the conversation revolves around Alessandra Giliani, we inevitably encounter broader questions about the historiography of science, about whose name is etched in books and who, at times, disappears into anonymity. In the female sphere, the so-called "law of oblivion"—also known as the "Matilda effect," a concept introduced by Rossiter (1993) to denounce the practice of denying or minimizing the achievements of female scientists—has proven to be a painful constant throughout the centuries. Figures like Giliani—even if they appear only in legends or in a fragment of evidence—serve as a poignant reminder that the history of science is far richer and more diverse than Eurocentric and patriarchal narratives often suggest.

3 CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Alessandra Giliani goes far beyond a mere footnote in the history of anatomy; she has transformed into a legendary figure who embodies, in her trajectory, the struggle and triumph of the human spirit in pursuit of knowledge. Whether considered a purely factual character in later accounts or a blend of fact and myth, her presence as a symbol of female science remains indisputable. If real, however, Giliani's alleged contributions to the study of anatomy would be significant (OAKES, 2007, LOST WOMEN OF SCIENCE, 2025; SARTON, 1947). Her life has also inspired modern works, such as Barbara Quick's novel, A Golden Web (2010) (HARPERCOLLINS, 2025, BROOKLYN MUSEUM, 2025), and she is one of the 1,038 women honored in Judy Chicago's renowned art installation. She makes us realize the urgency of deconstructing dominant narratives, unearthing silenced voices, and recognizing the multiple paths that lead to scientific progress. The freshness of her youth, the genius attributed to her, and the tragic outcome that awaited her still fuel reverence and push us to revisit the history of science, celebrating the invaluable worth of each of its agents, without distinction of gender or how well they were remembered by chroniclers. Alessandra Giliani remains a guiding star, casting her light upon the road that future generations of scientists—especially women—tread as they dare to explore the unknown and innovate, perpetuating a legacy of curiosity that transcends the boundaries of time.

Revista ARACÊ
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