Gábor Petneházi

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Immortal Mortality

Erasmus, Terminus and the Two Missing Skulls

Abstract

From the 1510s onwards, Desiderius Erasmus adopted the image of the Roman god Terminus, together with the motto "concedo nulli" (I yield to none) as his private emblem, which became part of his consciously shaped self-representation. According to Erasmus' own explanation, Terminus served as a symbol of mortality, but since he was a master of ambiguity, it could also have symbolised immortality for him. The article aims to unravel Erasmus' true relationship to this particular emblem, which ironically seems to have endured even beyond his death. In order to uncover this, it will build on selected texts from Erasmus' oeuvre, several of his personal belongings, as well as the well known engravings of him made by Dürer and Holbein.

Keywords

humanism, emblematics, portraits, Erasmus, Terminus, death, eternity

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Habent sua fata libelli – ossaque etiam auctorum.[1] Not only books, but also the mortal remains of their writers find sometimes a strange fate: their resting places can be disturbed, and their bones can be removed by profane or robbers' hands. This is what happened to Petrarch's skull, which has presumably been stolen during the 19th century and replaced by another female exemplar,[2] and something similar happened to the corpse of Erasmus, whose 20th-century vicissitudes would probably have made him clap his hands in recognition. His tomb beneath the floor of the Minster in Basel remained undisturbed for centuries, but the actual burial site was forgotten, especially after the ornate inscription was moved in the 19th century from the central nave to its present location in the side nave.[3] In 1928, when the original epitaph was found in the floor and a tomb was discovered underneath, it was assumed for decades that the remains of Erasmus had been discovered. But something was rotten in Denmark. The skeleton did not match the physiological characteristics of Erasmus known from the different pictures. It indicated a larger height of the deceased than expected; the bones showed signs of chronic syphilis; and the skull was unusually small and flattened – an anomaly which has been explained as the reason why Erasmus was wearing his distinctive hat in every portrayal.[4]

In 1974, however, a new possible identification came to light. During a subsequent excavation another 16th century tomb was found next to the syphilitic skeleton, containing the remains of a shorter man who had died at about the age of seventy. But disaster struck when the photographer was leaning over the tomb to take the first picture of the newly discovered bones. As he attempted to photograph the skull, the improperly fixed objective lens fell right on target and shattered the already heavily calcified head bones, leaving nothing but the jaw and a number of teeth. Despite the head being destroyed, it was still possible to identify the remains as that of Erasmus. In addition to the aforementioned physiological characteristics, Erasmus' identity was confirmed by a telling object found in the tomb. A copy of the famous bronze medallion made by Quentin Metsys in 1519, had namely been placed next to the body at the time of burial, with the image of Erasmus himself on

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1 This article is based on research conducted for an essay that appeared in Hungarian: "Erasmus, Terminus és a hiányzó koponya", *Antikvitás és Reneszánsz* 10 (2022), pp. 127–142, and includes its main points, revised and updated. I am grateful to Hanne Berendse for the comments and linguistic revision.

2 C. Povolo, *Il frate, il conte e l'antropologo. Tre personaggi in cerca di Francesco Petrarca in Arqua*, Verona 2020; *id.*, "Rivisitazioni petrarchesche", *Quaderni Veneti. Nuova Serie Digitale* 3 (2014), no. 1–2, pp. 149–154.

3 B.R. Jenny, "Erasmus' Rückkehr nach Basel, Lebensende, Grab und Testament", in *Erasmus von Rotterdam: Vorkämpfer für Friede und Toleranz. Ausstellung zum 450. Todestag des Erasmus von Rotterdam veranstaltet vom Historischen Museum Basel* [catalogue of an exhibition held in the Historisches Museum, Basel, 26 April–7 September 1986], Basel 1986, pp. 63–65; B. Kaufmann, "Das Grab des Erasmus im Basler Münster", in *Erasmus von Rotterdam*, pp. 66–67.

4 A. Werthemann, "Schädel und Gebeine des Erasmus von Rotterdam", *Verhandlungen der Naturforschenden Gesellschaft in Basel* 40 (1929), no. 2, pp. 313–394; cf. J.B. Gleason, „The Allegation of Erasmus' Syphilis and the Question of His Burial Site", *Erasmus of Rotterdam Society Yearbook* 10 (1990), pp. 122–139.

one side, and his personal emblem, Terminus on the other along his famous motto: *concedo nulli* – I yield to no one.[5]

Death and the afterlife are quite mysterious subject in themself, and the following essay is not written with any intention of mystification. I would like simply emphasise the great consciousness with which Erasmus tried to shape the image of himself during his lifetime,[6] while at the same time drawing attention to the remarkable correlation between his own memory-shaping strategy, and the fate of his mortal remains in the 20th century.

Terminus – *concedo nulli*

The story of Erasmus' personal emblem or *impresa*[7] is relatively well known, as he himself summarised it in a late letter to Alfonso Valdes in 1528, with the following words:

> When Alexander, titular archbishop of St Andrews, was called back to his native land from Siena by his father, King James of Scotland, he summoned me from Rome and, like a grateful and loving pupil, made me a present of several rings as a souvenir of the time we had spent together. Among these was one with Terminus sculpted upon the gem. Previously I did not know who it was, but an Italian, who was a connoisseur of antiquities, identified him. I took it as an omen and interpreted it as a warning that the boundary of my life was not far off. I was about forty years old at the time. Lest this thought escape my mind, I began to stamp this image on my letters. I added a line of verse, as I said previously. And so, I made myself a motto from this profane god, which exhorted me to a reform of life. For death is the true bourne that yields to no one. That cast image, moreover, bears the inscription

[5] G. Kreis, "Erasmus'zertrümmerter Schädel – ein Wissenschaftskrimi", *Basler Zeitung Kulturmagazin*, 8 July 2006. Gleason, in his article cited above, concluded that none of the skeletons could have belonged to Erasmus. The Basel authorities tried to cover up the accident, and even the 1986 exhibiton catalogue did not clarify what had really happened. A photo of the excavated tomb and the missing skull see *Erasmus von Rotterdam*, p. 103. The whole story of the mishap told by Beat Rudolf Jenny: *Sporen van Erasmus*, part 5: *Swiss* (Documentary), NGN Produkties, 2002, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AtvN4D6SLI (accessed: 6 September 2024).

[6] Self-fashioning in the Greenblattian sense, whether through Erasmus's correspondence, his publications or the conscious recomposition of his biography, is a subject that has been extensively studied in the literature. The most important ones: L. Jardine, *Erasmus Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print*, Oxford and Princeton, 1993 (2nd ed. 2015), especially pp. 27–54; K.A.E. Enenkel, *Die Erfindung des Menschen. Die Autobiographik des frühneuzeitlichen Humanismus von Petrarca bis Lipsius*, Berlin and New York 2008, pp. 467–512; J. Papy, "Erasmus, Europe, and Cosmopolitanism: The Humanist Image and Message in His Letters", in *Erasmo da Roterodam e la cultura europea. Atti dell'Incontro di Studi nel V cententario della laurea di Erasmo all'Università di Torino*, ed. by P.B. Rossi, Florence 2008, pp. 27–42.

[7] I will not go here into further detail on the theory and practice of renaissance *impresa*, just a few of the vast literature: D.S. Caldwell, *The Sixteenth-Century Italian Impresa in Theory and Practice*, New York 2004; *The Italian Emblem: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by D. Mansueto, Glasgow 2007.

> in Greek: 'Behold the end of a long life'; the corresponding Latin proverb is: 'Death is the ultimate boundary of things.' They will say: 'You could have inscribed that on a skull.' Perhaps I would have accepted that one if it had occurred to me, but I liked the one I chose, first because it came about by chance, and then because it had a double attraction: on the one hand, its allusion to an old and celebrated history and, on the other hand, its obscurity, which is the property of mottoes.[8]

Here, Erasmus describes three objects from his personal belongings which are now kept at the Historisches Museum in Basel.[9] The first is the neat gold ring with a red stone decorated by the unlabelled image of Terminus, or rather by a herm of a bearded man: it was indeed a gift from Alexander Stewart, the eldest illegitimate son of King James IV of Scotland, in 1509. The second is the silver seal of Erasmus designed after this gem around 1513. It shows a herm of a young man with floating hair in front view; the name 'Terminus' is written on the herm's base and the inscription *cedo nulli* appears around the seal: as he explains in the letter to Valdes, depending on whether Terminus is read before or after the motto, we get an iambic or a trochaic half-line.[10] The third object, which was already mentioned, is the bronze medallion made by Metsys in 1519. It is a size of a coaster and shows two different images. On one side it shows a profile of Erasmus, the abbreviation of his name (Er. Rot.), surrounded by the Greek motto ("his writings will show better") and the Latin explanatory inscription (*imago ad vivam effigiem expressa* – made according his living figure). On the other side ports a portrait of Terminus, also in profile, with the motto *concedo nulli* while on the edges of the medal Greek and Latin mottos referring to death are written – the Horatian *mors*

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8 *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters 1926 to 2081 (1528)*, transl. by C. Fantazzi, Toronto 2011 (Collected Works of Erasmus [CWE], 14), p. 244. Cf. *Opus Epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, vol. 7, ed. by P.S. Allen, H.M. Allen, Oxford 1928 p. 431: "Alexander, Archiepiscopus titulo S. Andreae, cum a patre Jacobo Scotiae Rege, Senis in patriam revocaretur, mihi Romam evocato, velut gratus et amicus discipulus, annulos aliquot dono dedit, habitae inter nos consuetudinis *μνημόσυνον*. In his erat, qui in gemma sculptum habebat Terminum. Nam hoc prius ignotum indicavit Italus quidam, rerum antiquarum curiosus. Arripui omen, & interpretatus sum admoneri me, non procul abesse vitae terminum: nam id temporis agebam annum circiter quadragesimum. Haec cogitatio ne posset excidere, litteris hoc signum imprimere coepi. Addidi carmen, ut ante dictum est. Itaque ex profano Deo feci mihi symbolum, adhortans ad vitae correctionem: Mors enim vere Terminus est, qui nulli cedere novit. Atqui in fusili imagine adscriptum est Graece, *ὅρα τέλος μακροῦ βίου*, id est, *Specta finem longae vitae,* Latine, *Mors ultima linea rerum.* Poteras, inquient, insculpere defuncti cranium. Forsitan accepturus eram, si obvenisset: sed hoc arrisit, primum quia fortuito contigit, deinde quod geminam haberet gratiam, alteram ex allusione ad priscam ac celebrem historiam, alteram ex obscuritate, quae symbolis est peculiaris".

9 See: *Erasmus von Rotterdam*, pp. 73–75; L. Schmitt, *Der Siegelring des Erasmus von Rotterdam*, Basel 2009 (Basler Kostbarkeiten, 30), pp. 11, 24–26.

10 *Opus Epistolarum*, vol. 7, p. 431: "Vident illic sculptam imaginem, inferne saxum, superne juvenem capillis volitantibus. An haec habet aliquid Erasmi? Id si parum est, vident in ipso saxo expressum, Terminus, in quam dictionem si desinas, versus erit jambicus dimeter acatalectus, *Concedo nulli Terminus*: Sin hinc incipias, erit dimeter trochaicus acatalectus, *Terminus concedo nulli*".

ultima linea rerum[11]; and the Solonian *ὅρα τέλος μακροῦ βίου* (look at the end of a long life).[12]

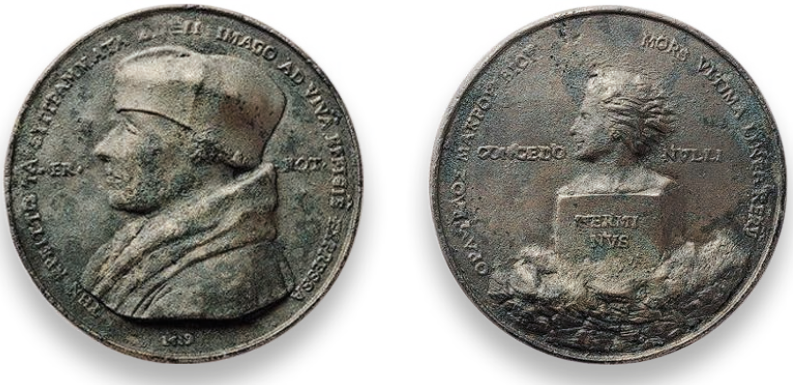

Fig. 1. The medallion found in Erasmus' tomb. Historisches Museum Basel, Basel, inv./cat.nr. 1974/A 390 (Public Domain: https://rkd.nl/en/explore/images/264776)

However, his interpretation, written to Valdes in 1528, at least distorts or even deliberately confuses things. Erasmus's retrospective defence – as Edgar Wind has explained in a short but witty essay[13] – that the speaker is not him but Terminus should be treated with due criticism; if we do so, the *(con)cedo nulli* means exactly what his critics have accused him:[14] the proclamation of Erasmus' humanist self-consciousness and independence as a philologist-theologian-polymath, a new kind of intellectual creed, the manifestos of which we have since been enjoying in his many writings.

The explanation of the figure of the young man with the flying hair is also hidden in the same letter to Valdes. Although he could refer to several classical sources (Ovid or Gellius),[15] Erasmus cites Livy, where Terminus and Iuventas are mentioned

11 Hor. *Epist.* I, 16, 79.

12 Cf. most recently: J. Kiliańczyk-Zięba, *Printers' Devices in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: Iconographic Sources and Ideological Content*, Leiden 2024, pp. 73–88.

13 E. Wind, "Ænigma Termini", *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1 (1937), no. 1, pp. 66–69.

14 Kiliańczyk-Zięba, *Printers' Devices*, pp. 79–82.

15 Ov. *Fasti*, II, 639–684; Gell. XII, 6; Varro *Ling.* 2 (fr. 35 Funaioli). Poliziano's brilliant explanation for the latter: *Miscellanies*, vol. 1, ed. and transl. by A.R. Dyck, A. Cottrell, London 2020 (The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 89), pp. 221–223.

together as having had their statues not moved for the sake of Iuppiter Capitolinus.[16] The original red-stone ring given to him by Alexander Stewart, if it had indeed a depiction of Terminus, shows a barely visible man with a beard and long hair. By engraving the head of a clearly young man as Terminus on his seal, and later on the bronze medallion, Erasmus was probably trying to condense the two deities of Livius into a single symbol. Interpreting the combined figures of the Youth and the Frontier as a symbol of death is not, however, the most obvious reading. Rather, it could be seen as a warning to preserve the totality of life and the youthful intransigence until death; the Horatian *mors ultima linea rerum* could clearly have been a reference to this even in 1519, when Metsys' medal was made.

It is also certain, however – as Edgar Wind warns – that Erasmus was criticised for the emblem once the motto *concedo nulli* became too similar to Luther's saying: *Ich stehe hier und kann nicht anders*.[17] Because of this, it became important for Erasmus to distinguish himself (again, as Terminus) from Luther in this field as well, as he explains at the beginning of the letter to Valdes – a passage that is also one of the gems of Erasmus' ambiguous rhetoric, which we will return to later:

> These fault finders, or rather troublemakers, carp with eyes closed at what they neither see nor understand, such is the potency of the disease. And in the meantime they think of themselves as the pillars of the church, when they do nothing but betray their own stupidity, joined with an equal malice, is more known the world over than is good for them. They imagine that the words 'I yield to no one' spoken by Erasmus. But if they were to read my writings they would see that there is hardly anyone, no matter how mediocre, to whom I should prefer myself, more ready to concede to everyone than to none. Those who know me more closely through friendly conversation will attribute any other vice to me but arrogance. They will declare that I resemble more the Socratic 'I know one thing, namely, that I know nothing' than'I yield to no one.' But let them imagine, if they will, that I am so insolent as to put myself before everyone; do they also think that I am so stupid that I would proclaim this in a motto?[18]

Here Erasmus unmasks himself mainly by evoking Socrates and his own foolishness, which serve as a caveat for the learned reader: "beware, it may well be that all this means the opposite of what you think you understand". If we apply the Socratic

[16] Liv. I, 55; V, 54.

[17] Wind, "Ænigma Termini", pp. 67–68.

[18] *The Correspondence of Erasmus* (CWE 14), p. 241. Cf. *Opus Epistolarum*, vol. 7, p. 430: "Isti *φιλαίτιοι* vel sycophantae potius, clausis oculis carpunt, quod nec vident, nec intelligunt. Tanta est morbi vis. Atque interim sibi videntur Ecclesiae columnae, cum nihil aliud quam traducant suam stoliditatem, cum pari malitia conjunctam, jam notiores Orbi quam expedit. Somniant ab Erasmo dici, *Concedo nulli*. Atqui si mea scripta legerent, viderent vix quenquam esse tam mediocrem ut illi me praeferam, citius concedens omnibus quam nulli. Jam qui me propius ex convictu familiari noverunt, quidvis vitii tribuent potius quam arrogantiam: meque fatebuntur propiorem esse illi Socratico, *hoc unum scio, me nihil scire,* quam huic, *concedo nulli*. Sed fingant animum tam insolentem esse mihi, ut memet omnibus anteponam, etiamne tam stultum existimant, ut id symbolo profitear?"

phrase, still going by Wind, to the *concedo nulli*, the sentence would roughly read, "in that I yield to no one, I yield to all."[19] In 1528, in a state of schism of Christianity, it meant "I will not join either side, for all are wrong, but all have their truth." *Here I stand, I can do no other. Concedo nulli.*

The better will show his writings

Having considered the meaning of the mottoes, it is worth looking at the visual depictions. The portraits of Erasmus, including Metsys' medallion, are well known and have been the subject of numerous studies, both individually and collectively.[20] It is also clear from Erasmus's statements that he actively engaged in the creation of his self-image and tried to promote it by all means, although he was not always satisfied with the outcome – despite having the best and most renowned artists of the time working for him. It must be noted that during the Renaissance, painting and sculpting were not seen as part of the artes liberales, as they were seen as crafts of the hand rather than arts of the mind such as music and literature were.[21] In line with this, Erasmus was rather indifferent to the work of the Renaissance painters and sculptors – even of those that were celebrated in his time. Moreover, as a reformist, he condemned the building of incredibly expensive churches, which is exactly what provided a living for many artists.[22] Consequently, Erasmus had little affection even for Metsys and Holbein, the artists of the most successful portraits of him.

Erasmus seemed to have had more respect for Dürer, the artist of his portrait engraving that he perhaps most eagerly awaited.[23] The reason for this was likely

[19] Wind, "Ænigma Termini", p. 68: "In ceding to all he really ceded to none".

[20] A. Gerlo, *Erasme et Ses Portraitistes: Metsijs, Dürer*, *Holbein*, Nieuwkoop 1969; E. Panofsky, "Erasmus and the Visual Arts", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 32 (1969), pp. 200–227; J. Rowlands, "Terminus, the Device of Erasmus of Rotterdam: A Painting by Holbein", *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 67 (1980), no. 2, pp. 50–54; A. Hayum, "Dürer's Portrait of Erasmus and the Ars Typographorum", *Renaissance Quarterly* 38 (1985), no. 4, pp. 650–687; E. Landolt, "Erasmus und die Künstler", in *Erasmus von Rotterdam*, pp. 19–25; W. Ludwig, "Das bessere Bildnis des Gelehrten", *Philologus* 142 (1998), pp. 123–161; *id.*, "Ein Porträt des Erasmus", *Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft* 27 (2003), pp. 161–179; H. Vredeveld, "'Lend a Voice': The Humanistic Portrait Epigraph in the Age of Erasmus and Dürer", *Renaissance Quarterly* 66 (2013), pp. 509–567; T. Dominici, "Erasmus of Rotterdam and Quentin Metsys: A Reassessment", in *Arts, Portraits and Represantation in the Reformation Era: Proceedings of the Fourth Reformation Research Consortium Conference*, ed. by P. Foresta, F. Meloni, Göttingen 2019, pp. 109–122; B.A. Kamińska, "'But for the Voice, the Likeness is Alive': Portraits of Erasmus of Rotterdam and Their Reception Among Renaissance Humanists", in *Ingenium et Labor. Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Antoniemu Ziembie z okazji 60. urodzin*, ed. by P. Borusowski *et al.*, Warsaw 2020, pp. 129–136.

[21] J. Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture: The Visual Construction of Identity and the Social Status of the Artist*, New Haven and London 1998, pp. 19–22.

[22] Panofsky, "Erasmus and the Visual Arts", pp. 201–205.

[23] Hayum, "Dürer's Portrait of Erasmus", pp. 652–657.

two-fold: first, Dürer was seen as one of the most innovative artists of his time, and second, Dürer's engraving was more widely distributed in print. So, Erasmus was all the more disappointed when the Nuremberg master's work – a large, truly imposing and representative engraving – barely resembled the original model. This may have been due to the delay – Dürer completed the engraving only five years after he had done a charcoal drawing of Erasmus in Brussels – but it may also have been due to the artist's pro-Lutheranism and his reservations towards Erasmus.[24] But there is another important moment here, which rhymes perfectly with the letter to Valdes. Namely, a notable absence in Dürer's portrait of Erasmus – the absence of a skull.

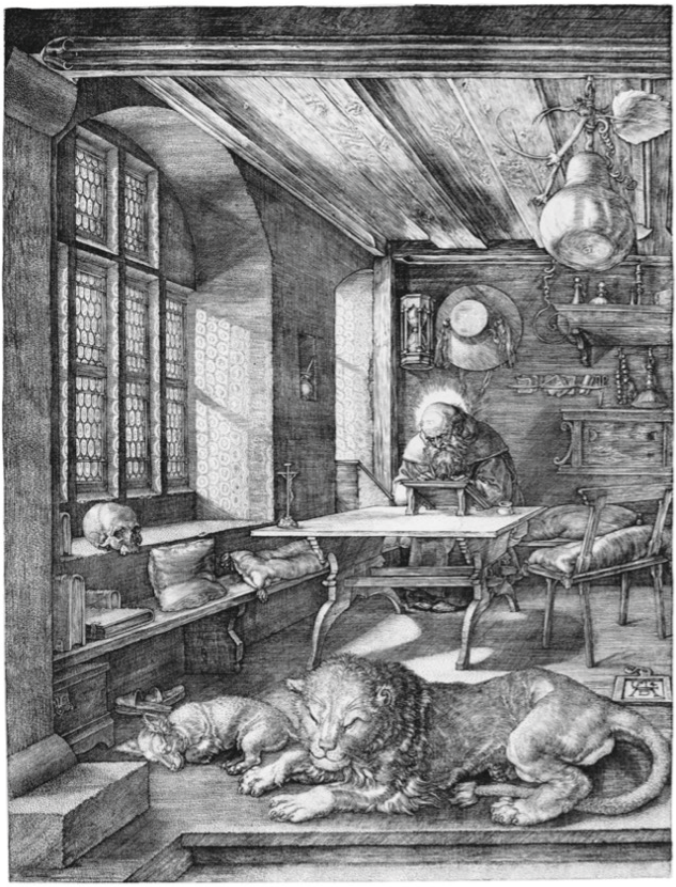

Fig. 2. Albrecht Dürer, *St Jerome in his study* (1514). Wikimedia Commons

[24] *Ibid.*, pp. 668–673. Cf. S. Zeunert, *Bilder in Martin Luthers Tischreden. Argumente und Beispiele gegen die Laster, Hochmut, Abgötterei und Betrug* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Universität Trier), Trier 2016, pp. 48–57.

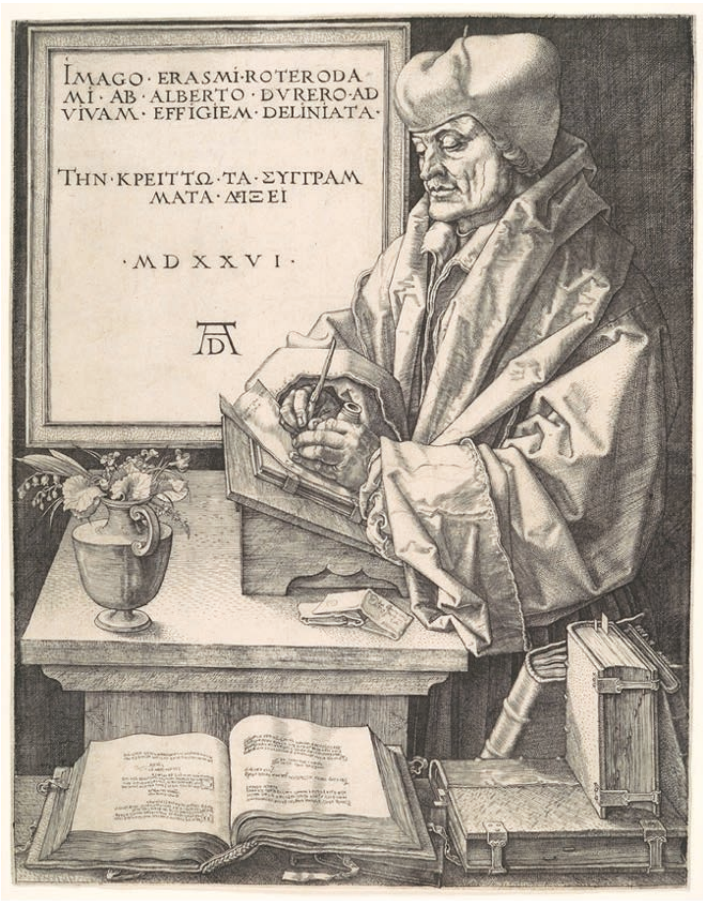

Fig. 3. Albrecht Dürer, *Erasmus* (1526). Wikimedia Commons

In Dürer's engraving we find Erasmus immersed in writing, as in the portraits of Metsys and Holbein, with half-closed eyes, concentrating on his work. The books and the writing desk are attributes of the philologist's profession, while the inscription advertises both Dürer and Erasmus, and the Greek motto from Metsys' medal: the better (image) will show his writings. But the pose of the writing figure is also familiar from elsewhere. Dürer made his engraving of *St Jerome in His Cell* in 1514, at about the same time as the large engravings of *The Knight, Death and the Devil* and *Melancholia* (Erasmus' *Encheiridion* is usually considered to be one of the major inspirations for the former). In *St Jerome's Study*, the setting, the perspectival, sunlit room, the symbolic animals and objects are as important as the main figure. The skull overlooking Jerome from the windowsill is a symbol of death, the brevity of life and passing time, just as Erasmus tried to set up Terminus in his letter to Valdes. But then, as he notes in the same passage, he could have chosen a skull as an

emblem.[25] He did not, because, as he himself writes, he found Terminus much more special, obscure and ambiguous. And because – let us add – he had no intention of identifying himself with human transience. He had much greater ambitions than that.

The reference to St Jerome is, however, very relevant: Erasmus edited Jerome's letters, re-translated the New Testament from the Greek, and paraphrased the Bible, essentially revising and even putting in a parenthesis the work of the Church Fathers, especially Jerome. But in Dürer's portrait, in front of the figure of Erasmus, a bouquet of wilting spring flowers in a beautiful vase can be seen as a sort of admonishment of the artist. The skull is not only a symbol of death, but also of everything that comes after death: while the wilting bouquet of flowers – and thus Erasmus's writings (Dürer might have thought) – soon became nothing, meanwhile Jerome's works have endured the test of centuries.[26] The bunch of lilies of the valley may also come to symbolise a kind of femininity and virginity – they appear regurarly in depictions of the Annunciation. Thus, this emphatic secondary figure is again, in Luther's words, the symbol of the *rex amphiboliarum*, the master of ambiguity Erasmus.[27] Therefore the wilting flowers would be probably more appropriate than an austere skull, and be more fitting to Erasmus' taste.

Mors ultima linea rerum?

Here we must return to the original emblem: its birth dates back to the same period in which Erasmus was not just teaching the son of the Scottish king in Italy, but also worked in one of the most famous and best printing houses of the time, the workshop of Aldus Manutius in Venice, in an environment that gave his creativity real wings. One of the most successful works of the period, and of Erasmus's oeuvre, was the *Adagia*, a collection of thousands of Latin and Greek proverbs and literary expressions with explanations, published by Aldus in 1508. These explanations were supplemented in later editions by such notable political essays as *Sileni Alcibiadis, Scarabeus aquilam quaerit*, and *Dulce bellum inexpertis*. Two major essays, however, were already included in this early edition: the *Festina lente* and the *Herculei labores*, in both of which Erasmus wrote the praise of philological work and humanism respectively: in the latter he placed his own work on a pedestal, and in the former he explained the emblem of his publisher, Aldus. Since there is no mention of Terminus or Erasmus' mottoes in the *Adagia*, this parallel must be invoked to understand Erasmus' deep commitment and belief in the value of his work and, ultimately, his attitude to death and human transience.

[25] On the skull as Vanitas-symbol cf. L. De Girolami Cheney, "The Symbolism of the Skull in Vanitas: Homo Bulla Est", *Cultural and Religious Studies* 6 (2018), no. 5, pp. 267–284.

[26] Zeunert, *Bilder in Martin Luthers Tischreden*, pp. 48–52.

[27] *D. Martin Luther's Tischreden oder Colloquia, dritte Abtheilung*, ed. by K.E. Förstemann, Leipzig 1846 (D. Martin Luther's Sämtliche Schrifte, 22), 2053: "Erasmus ist rex amphiboliarum, ein Meister geschraubeter und Wankelwort und Reden".

The *Festina lente*, like the *concedo nulli*, is a regular *impresa* consisting of an image and an allegorical motto: a humanist coat of arms conceived in the spirit of the *vera nobilitas* and the Renaissance, which appeared on the front cover of the Aldina-prints from 1502 onwards. The dolphin clinging to the anchor and the Greek motto – as Erasmus explains – were originally the emblem of Emperor Titus. Its revival by Aldus – as in the case of Erasmus' ring – is linked to a specific object: one of Titus' coins. However, placed on the cover of the Aldina, it symbolised considerably more than its original meaning: the transcendent power of printing and the hope that, through the persistent work of reviving ancient literature and culture, literacy and humanistic studies would eventually triumph over barbarism. At least that is how Erasmus interpreted it:

> Nor do I think this symbol was more illustrious then, when it was stamped on the imperial coinage and suffered the wear and tear of circulation as it passed from one merchant to another, than it is now, when in every nation, even outside the limits of any Christian empire, it spreads and wins recognition, it is held fast and prized in company with books of all kinds in both the ancient languages, by all who are devoted to the cult of liberal studies. I think especially of those who despise the barbarous and uncouth learning of our own day and aspire to that true knowledge stemming from Antiquity, for the restoration of which this man was surely born - was made and modelled, so to say, by the fates themselves. Such is his burning devotion to this single end, such is his tireless zeal, so great his readiness to shoulder any burden, so that their supply of texts may be restored, complete and genuine and uncorrupted, to all intelligent men of good will. How great the influence he has already exercised in this direction, although with fate (I would almost say) against him, the facts are there to prove.[28]

In the quoted passage, two important aspects are worth noting: firstly, the playful equation (although not emphasized in the English translation) that Erasmus expresses by the use of the same adjective for the emblem and its owner (*inscalptum symbolum – scalptus a fatis*); secondly, the sense of limitlessness in space and time and the devout affirmation of the sacred task. Erasmus, as author as well as editor, worked in the team of the printing house, so he was speaking essentially from his

[28] *Adages II i 1 to II vi 100*, transl. by R.A.B. Mynors, Toronto 1991 (Collected Works of Erasmus, 33), p. 9; cf. *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, vol. 2.3: *Adagiorum Chilias Secunda*, ed. by M. Szymański, Amsterdam 2005, p. 16: "Nam huius eadem, quae quondam Tito Vespasiano placuerunt, celebrantur insignia, non notissima modo, verumetiam gratissima quibuscunque ubivis terrarum bonae literae vel notae sunt, vel charae. Neque vero symbolum hoc tum illustrius fuisse crediderim, cum inscalptum imperatorio nomismati negociatorum manibus terendum circumferretur, una cum omnigenis utriusque linguae voluminibus propagatur, agnoscitur, tenetur, celebratur ab omnibus, qui liberalium studiorum colunt sacra, praeseritm iis, qui fastidita barbara ista pinguique doctrina ad veram atque antiquam aspirant eruditionem, ad quam restituendam vir is quasi natus et ab ipsis, ut ita dixerim, fatis factus scalptusque videtur: tam ardentibus votis unum hoc optat, tam infatigabili molitur studio, usqueadeo nullum refugit laborem, ut literaria supellex ez integra, et syncera puraue bonis ingeniis restituatur. Quam quidem ad rem quantum iam attulerit momenti tametsi fatis, pene dixerim, invitis, res ipsa nimirum indicat".

own experience and thinking of himself too (cf. *Herculei labores*) when he wrote the following about Aldus:

> A labour indeed worthy of Hercules, fit for the spirit of a king, to give back to the world something so heavenly, when it was in a state of almost complete collapse; to trace out what lies hid, to dig up what is buried, to call back the dead, to repair what is mutilated, to correct what is corrupted in so many ways, especially by the fault of those common printers who reckon one pitiful gold coin in the way of profit worth more than the whole realm of letters. … But he who restores a literature in ruins (almost a harder task than to create one) is engaged on a thing sacred and immortal, and works for the benefit not of one province only but of all nations everywhere and of all succeeding ages.[29]

Aldus, in contrast to Ptolemy's library in Alexandria, creates a library without walls, whose sole boundary is the globe, Erasmus continues,[30] and thus gives us the key to interpreting Terminus. Indeed, this Terminus (i.e. Erasmus), with masterful ambiguity, represents both the limit and the limitless: on the one hand, a very definite idea of what humanism, philological activity, the professional practice of *bonae litterae*, means; on the other hand, the limitlessness of the beneficial effects of this activity in time and space. Those who limit themselves to eternity and the limitless are indeed completely indifferent about the fate of their mortal vessel. And this brings us back to the skull being destroyed accidentally.

Behold the end of a long life

A few years after Erasmus's death, Luther, according to the *Tischreden*, blamed his great rival for having lived his whole life in extreme comfort, without having to care for family or flock, because he was neither a father nor a pastor, and he died essentially godless, caring only for himself. When he died alone, there was no priest by his side, he did not even take the last rites, his last words were only: *Fili Dei, miserere mei*.[31] This tendentious image, of course, is overshadowed by the enormous library of

[29] *Adages* (CWE 33), p. 10; cf. *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, vol. 2.3, p. 18: "Herculeanum, mehercule facinus ac regio quodam animo dignum rem tam divinam quasi funditus collapsam orbi restituere, latentia pervestigare, eruere retrusa, revocare extincta, sarcire mutila, emendare tot modis depravata, praecipue vulgarium istorum excusorum vitio, quibus unius etiam aureoli lucellum antiquius est quam vel universa res literaria. … At qui literas collapsas vindicat, nam id pene difficilius quam genuisse, primum rem sacram molitur et immortalem, tum non unius alicuius provinciae, sed omnium ubique gentium, omnium seculorum negotium agit".

[30] *Ibid.*: "Aldus bibliothecam molitur, cuius non alia septa sint, quam ipsius orbis".

[31] *Tischreden* 2056: "Erasmus Roterodamus hat in freyen Künsten viel trefflich Dinges geschrieben, denn er hat Verstand, Zeit und ein müßig Leben geführt, ohn alle Mühe und Beschwerung, hat nicht geprediget, noch offentlich gelesen, ist kein Hausvater gewest und ist in einem Stande ohn Gott, hat in aller Sicherheit gelebt, wie er denn auch gestorben ist. Am Todbette hat er keinen Kirchendiener

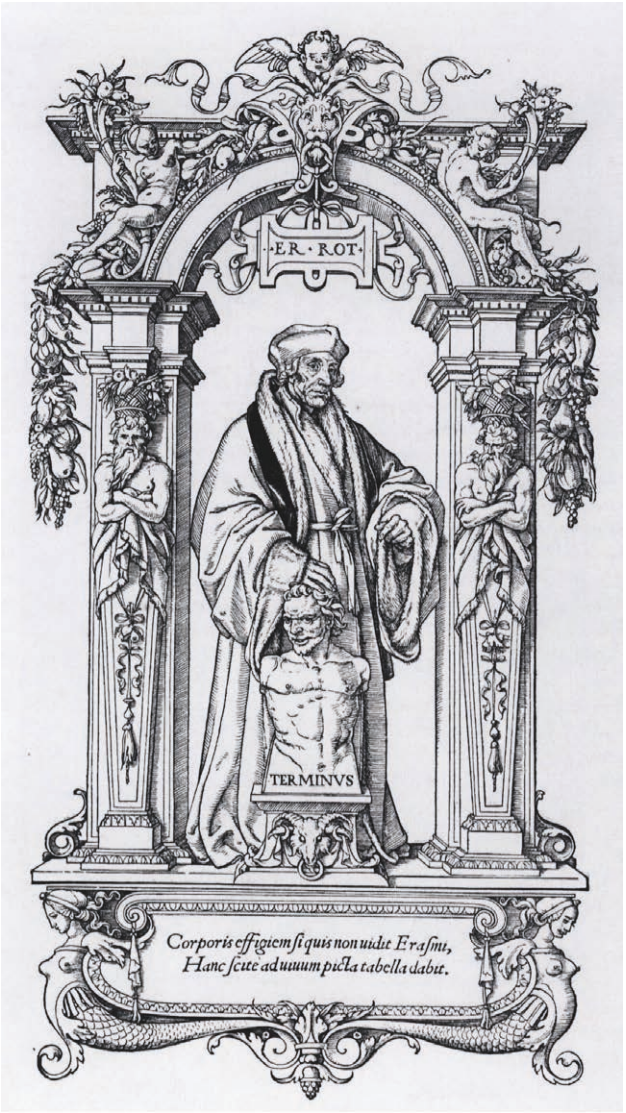

Fig. 4. Hans Holbein, *Erasmus (1538–1540)*. Wikimedia Commons

his oeuvre, which Erasmus organised in nine order during his lifetime, while taking care equally meticulously of his material belongings.[32] He found an excellent and conscientious executor of his will in Bonifacius Amerbach, who might have been

begehrt, noch das Sacrament, und diese Wort, so er am Ende soll geredt haben: *Fili Dei, miserere mei*". Cf. J. Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*, Princeton 1984, p. 187.

[32] See e.g. the excellent monograph about the fate of his library: E. van Gulik, *Erasmus and His Books*, transl. by J.C. Grayson, Toronto 2018.

the one, who placed the medallion next to the body at the funeral, which, through fate made his mortal remains identifiable more than four and a half centuries later, even though his skull is missing. Cosmic (and Erasmian) irony.

But whichever portraits of Erasmus we recall, and however impossible it may be after all to make a modern reconstruction of his face, since his skull was destroyed and is now non existing, his best image (as he so carefully arranged it) will be shown in his writings. On the Holbein engraving made for the first complete edition of ten volumes (1538–1540), edited by Beatus Rhenanus, Erasmus is facing the reader, leaning on a bearded Terminus. The herm's mouth and eyes, drawn up in laughter, are slightly sinister, while Erasmus' face is expressionless and statuesque. One of them continues to yield to no one, the other has become immortal already in life.

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Gábor Petneházi

Universität Innsbruck, Österreich / University of Innsbruck, Austria
gabor.petnehazi[at]uibk.ac.at
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4325-2569

Gábor Petneházi – postdoc researcher at the University of Innsbruck, Institute for Classical Philology and Neo-Latin Studies. His research interests include early modern historiography, humanism and Republic of Letters, as well as early modern politics and intellectual history. His most recent publications include articles on early modern Neo-Latin historiography in Hungary ("A bolygó humanista. Gian Michele Bruto Erdélybe érkezésének előtörténete", *Convivia Neolatina Hungarica* 5 (2023); "Ut tantus thesaurus ex tenebris in lucem hominum prodeat. 'Szamosközy István és a Rerum Ungaricarum libri'", in *Certamen X. Előadások a Magyar Tudomány Napján az Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület I. Szakosztályában*, ed. by E. Emese *et al.*, 2023) as well as translations of the works of Erasmus of Rotterdam.

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