P. hillipus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus Von Hohenheim, was born near Zurich, Switzerland, the year after Columbus discovered the new world. He inherited his interest from his father, a practising physician and a botanist. He was especially partial to the prefix para, and named himself Paracelsus (better than Celsus).

Paracelsus very likely studied the arts at the University of Vienna and medicine at the University of Ferrara in Italy. He recognised the relative development standstill of Middle Ages. He had the courage of his convictions and burned the works of Galen and Avicenna in public in 1527, as town physician of Basel. He denounced ancients in harsh terms, refusing to accept their theory of humours. He also insisted on lecturing in German instead of Latin. The result was that he was kicked out of Basel. He had to do much of wandering (part of it not altogether voluntary), for his life was marked by eccentricity, quarrelsomeness and vast number of enemies created by him. The last twelve years of his life were spent in practising without many publications, as printers were reluctant to accept his manuscripts.

Despite the mystical obscurity of statements, he marks the beginning of the transition from alchemy. He came to one crucial decision about the purpose of Alchemy, that it was not meant to discover methods for manufacturing gold but to prepare medicines to treat various diseases. Paracelsus’ contemporary and fellow physician Agriola, had the same point of view, but it was his loud mouth that did most to bring it to general notice. Apart from medicines used from plant sources, Paracelsus stressed the importance of minerals. He did not always achieve happy results; but his almost psychotic cocksureness led him to use chemicals, which included mercury compounds, sulphur, lead, antimony, iron and copper, even when practice showed them to be toxic.

Paracelsus wrote intelligently on the problems of mental disease, scoffing at theories of demonic possessions. He correctly associated head injuries with paralysis and cretinism with the goitre. He was first to describe the medical use of zinc and is sometimes considered its discoverer, though the alloy brass was known even in ancient times.

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Garcia Da Orta (1502-1568)

JV Pai-Dhungat

Garcia Da Orta-Portuguese India (Goa), 1946
Colloquies Simples by Garcia Orta-Portugal, 1964
Garcia Da Orta was born in Portugal. He received his medical degree from the University of Salamanca. For sometime he practised medicine at Castello de Vide, the village of his birth. A good clinician and a student of Materia medica, he was later Professor of Logic at Lisbon.

In 1534, Garcia sailed to far east as a surgeon to Portuguese navy. He established a residence and a medical garden at Goa. Albuquerque had founded the first European hospital in India in 1510. Hospital administration was given in Jesuits, who made it one of the best-managed hospitals in the world. A Frenchman, Pyard de Laval, provides a detailed account of the facilities. Alas, it was only meant for Europeans.

Da Orta prepared his illustrated monograph - Colloquies on the simples and drugs of India. This was the greatest work on Materia medica after ancient Dhanwantari Nighantu and Dioscorides, 1500 years earlier. His treatise was based on his extensive experience on the west coast of India. It is full of critical inquiry into descriptions, history and clinical effects. It was the first medical treatise to be printed in India and published in Goa in 1563. Later, it was translated in several languages including French, English, German and Spanish. He described the symptoms of cholera and is credited with bringing the disease to the attention of Western world. In doing so, he probably included acute (bacillary) and chronic (amoebic) dysentery as well. “Goans call it morni and we corrupt the word into mordexi”, he wrote.

Da Orta became rich in practice and in 1554, he gained a long lease on the then islands of Bombaim as Vazador (proprietor) from Portuguese authorities. He built a Quinta (Manor house) surrounded by a spacious garden amidst a few thatched huts and mudflats, on the western shore of bom bahia (the good bay). The sheer existence of these structures, together with the Manor house made them the starting point of the settlement that was to be Bombay, today’s financial capital of India. A century later in 1661, the King of Portugal gifted the Bombay islands to King Charles II of England, as a dowry, when he married the Portuguese princess, Catherine Braganza.

Michael Servetus or Miguel Serveto (1509 or 1511- 1553) was a theologian, physician and Renaissance humanist. He was born in Villanueva in Argon, Spain. A prodigy and a polymath, he was versed in many sciences: mathematics, astronomy, meteorology, geography, human anatomy and pharmacology as well as jurisprudence, translation, poetry and scholarly study of bible in its original languages. He was the first European physician to describe pulmonary circulation. He participated in Protestant Reformation and later developed a nontrinitarian Christology. Servetus spent his whole life struggling against dogmatism and intolerance that permeated Renaissance world. His attack on orthodoxy was so broad and blatant that he became heretic of the worst sort and was condemned by Catholics and Protestants alike. Finally at the instigation of Protestant reformer John Calvin (1509-1564), he was arrested in Geneva and burned at stake. Almost all the newly printed copies of his books were added to the fire.

Servetus left native Spain becoming a wondering scholar. He published his first major treatise “on the errors of trinity” (1531). Fearing arrest he went underground, and established a new identity as “Michael Villanovanus”. Under this name he edited a classic of a great antiquity by the Alexandrian astronomer-geographer Ptolemy’s “Geographia”. He returned to the University of Paris to...