

Georg Bartisch

(1535 – 1607)

Marina Morkos¹ & David Kaufman²

1. The Northern Hospital,
2. Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists



Portrait of Georg Bartisch



Portrait of the Duke of Saxony

Bartisch became an itinerant surgeon who travelled from fair to fair. In 1583, Bartisch self-published 'Ophthalmodouleia'. Bartisch eventually settled in Dresden and was appointed court oculist to Duke Augustus I of Saxony in 1588, at the age of 53.



Illustration from 'Ophthalmodouleia' demonstrating couching of cataract

Despite his superstitions, Bartisch was an innovative surgeon who wanted to create standards for ophthalmologists. He described an ophthalmologist as 'a tool and instrument for disease-afflicted mankind and a true servant of nature'.

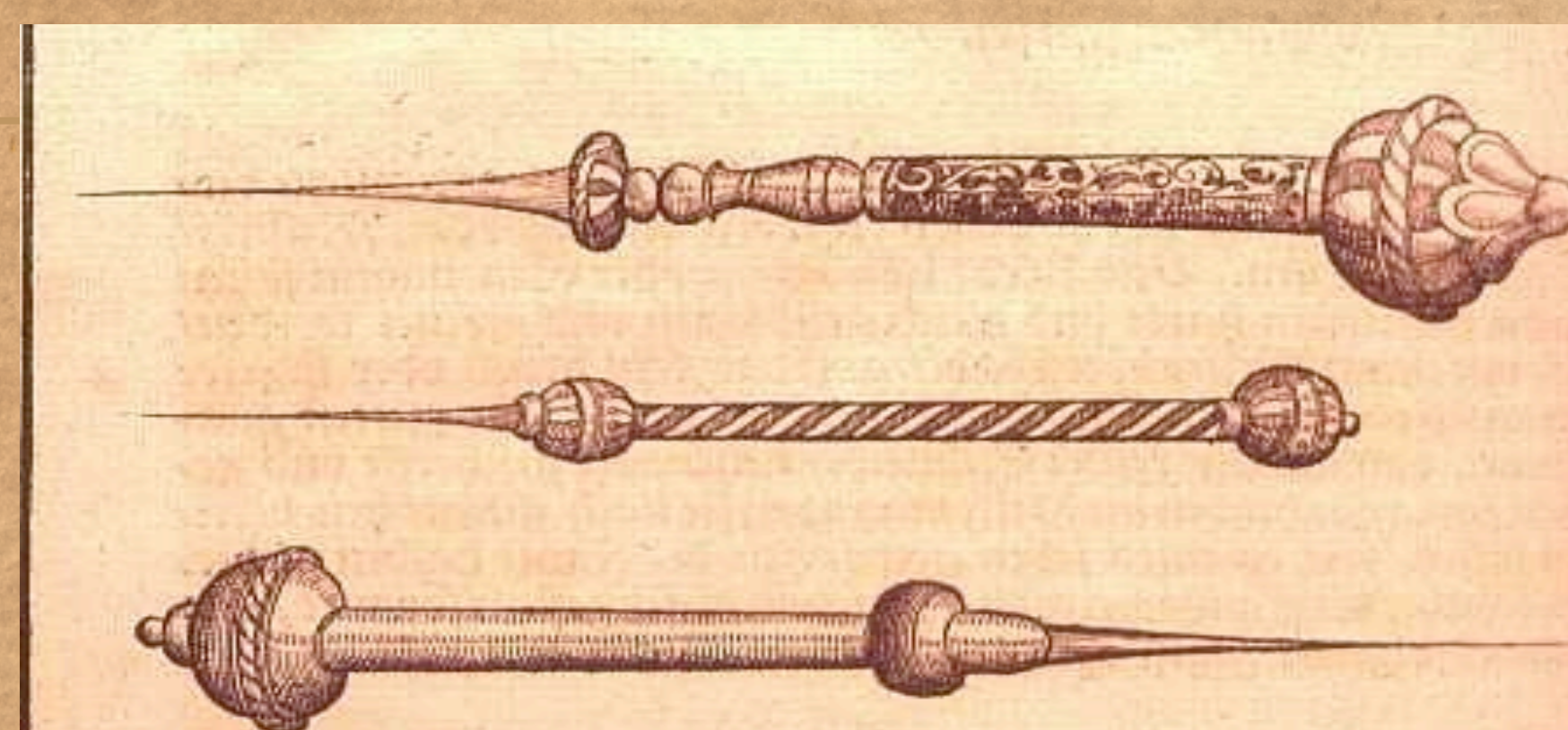


Illustration from 'Ophthalmodouleia' showing some of Bartisch's surgical instruments

Georg Bartisch was born in Germany in 1535 and grew up in the city of Dresden where he had a humble upbringing. Bartisch had an early interest in medicine, but unable to pursue higher education, he instead became apprenticed to 3 barber surgeons at the age of 13. He trained in dentistry, bladder stones and eye disease. His favourite teacher was an oculist and he went on to specialize in eye care.



Illustration from 'Ophthalmodouleia' showing patient restraint before surgery

Bartisch's beliefs were heavily influenced by the prevailing superstitions of his time. Bartisch considered many diseases to be punishment by the devil e.g. his aetiology for presbyopia was excessive alcohol consumption. Bartisch also believed certain stellar constellations were favourable for the eye e.g. the best time for eye surgery was during Libra, Sagittarius, Aquarius.

To prevent certain conditions, Bartisch recommended the wearing of amulets, regular bloodletting and magic potions.

Ophthalmodouleia

Ophthalmodouleia is considered the first systematic work on ocular disease and ophthalmic surgery and its publication in 1583 helped establish ophthalmology as a distinct medical and surgical specialty.

Ophthalmodouleia was dedicated to the Duke of Saxony, who offered copyright protection. The book was 280 pages long, published in German and included 92 woodcuts illustrations (drawn by Bartisch). Its chapters were organized beginning with head and eye anatomy and proceeding to strabismus, cataracts, external disease, and trauma. The chapters each include a description of the disorder, a discussion of the disease, a list of largely herbal prescriptions, and finally, surgical approaches.



Original Ophthalmodouleia cover



Illustration showing cloth mask to be worn for congenital strabismus

Strabismus

Bartisch recognised squints could be convergent, divergent or vertical and designed cloth head caps to be worn as soon as possible in congenital cases.



Anatomical flap illustration showing extra-ocular muscles and the layers beneath

Cataracts

Bartisch distinguished different kinds of cataracts according to their colour (white, blue, gray, green, yellow, and black). He believed some of the causes of cataract to include excessive crying, irregular and coarse foods and an impure stomach, liver and spleen.



Illustration demonstrating blue cataracts

Illustration demonstrating the technique for removal of an eye with a tumour; a needle is placed through the globe with string attached and the eye is removed with a sharp spoon



Spectacles

Bartisch was strongly opposed to the use of spectacles. He could not imagine how an eye that was already seeing poorly could ever see better when something was placed in front of it.



Spectacles belonging to the Duke of Saxony, purchased against the advice of Georg Bartisch