



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF  
MEDICINE AND THE BODY  
IN THE RENAISSANCE

INSTITUTIO SANTORIANA  
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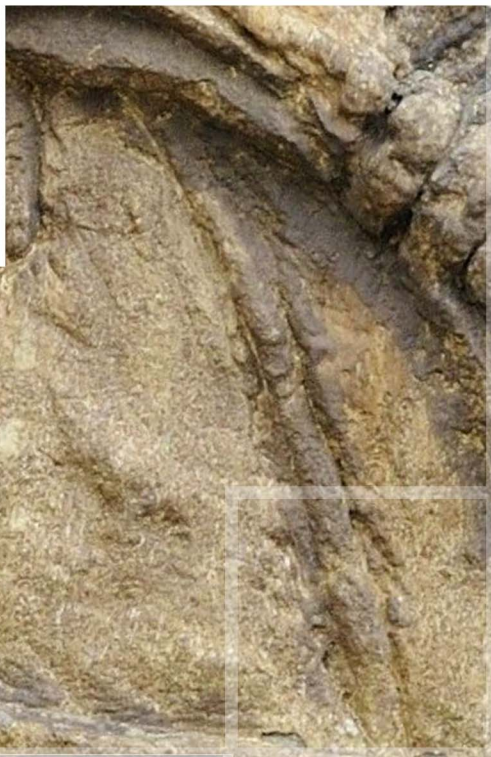


STUDIO FIRMANNO  
PER LA STORIA DELL'ARTE MEDICA E DELLA SCIENZA

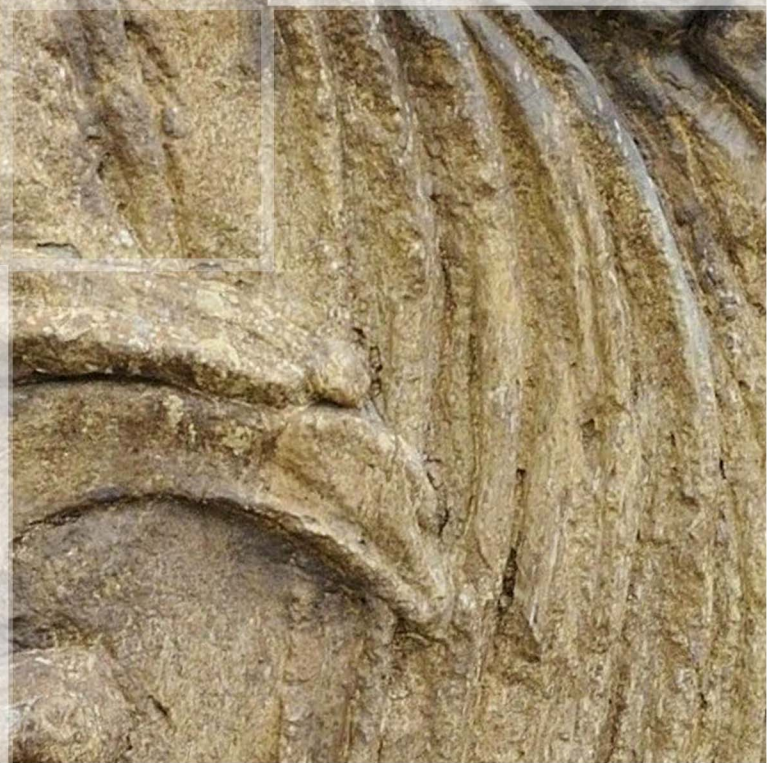


PSMEMM  
Palgrave Studies in Medieval & Early Modern Medicine

CSMBR  
ONLINE  
EVENTS



16  
MAY  
2023  
5.00pm CEST



# AT THE ROOTS OF 17<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY GEOLOGY

NICOLAUS STENO (1638-1686) FROM HUMAN ANATOMY TO FOSSILS

NUNO CASTEL-BRANCO • Villa I Tatti – Harvard University

In October 1666, Grand Duke Ferdinand II de' Medici (1610-1670), the last patron of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), asked Nicolaus Steno (1638-1686), the new anatomist at court, to dissect an extraordinarily large white shark caught in the Mediterranean Sea. This dissection became known for igniting Steno's geological research, which made him known today as "the founder of modern geology." In short, the story goes, Steno

realized during the dissection that shark's teeth were equal to a kind of fossils often found far from the sea. This led him to argue that the Earth has a history, which can be known through a series of rules still taught today as Steno's Principles of Stratigraphy. But the problem with associating this shark's dissection with Steno's research on fossils is that none of the eyewitnesses to the dissection mentioned the shark's teeth nor

anything related to fossils, including Steno. In this talk, I show that the story was far more complex than simply observing teeth of shark. Instead, it also involved reading an almost-hundred-year-old manuscript about fossils that directly contradicted Steno's research methods in anatomy. I show that Steno's turn to the study of fossils is better understood in light of his studies of the body.