

## PIETRO D'ABANO

### Italian scholar and scientist

*Abano founded the Paduan school of medicine, introducing elements of Arabic knowledge into Italy, and worked toward a synthesis of medieval, classical, Arabic, and Jewish philosophy.*

**BORN:** c. 1250; Abano, near Padua (now in Italy)

**DIED:** 1316; Padua

**ALSO KNOWN AS:** Peter of Abano; Petrus de Apono;

Petrus Aponus; Petrus Aponensis

**AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT:** Medicine, philosophy

#### EARLY LIFE

Pietro d'Abano (PYEH-troh duh-BAW-noh) was born in the village of Abano, now in northern Italy. Not much is known concerning his family background or early years. His father was a public notary and seems to have been reasonably well-to-do, for Pietro was able to receive an unusually good education. As a youth, he went to Greece and Constantinople, where he gained a mastery of the Greek language; among his early writings are translations of works of Aristotle into Latin. The ability to read the Greek classics in the original was quite unusual in Western Europe before the invading Ottoman Turks began to force Greek scholars to flee westward from the collapsing Byzantine Empire in the mid-fifteenth century.

On his return from Constantinople, Pietro attended the University of Paris, perhaps the best of the few institutions of higher learning that existed in late thirteenth century Europe. He studied philosophy, mathematics, and medicine for a number of years and earned a doctorate. Pietro's fame as a scholar and teacher quickly spread, and he became known as "the great Lombard."

#### LIFE'S WORK

In addition to his scientific and philosophical studies, Pietro was very interested in the pseudoscience of astrology. He often included astrological considerations and prayer in his medical prescriptions. Later in his life, he was responsible for the inscription of some four hundred astrological symbols on Padua's city hall. His reaching for supernatural forces was probably a reaction to the limited scientific knowledge of the fourteenth century. Pietro himself, for example, asserted firmly that it was impossible to determine the constituent parts of a compound. Thus, without outside help, the medieval scientist was so restricted as to be almost helpless. His astrological interests, however, eventually led to trouble with the Church.

Pietro was more a man of the Middle Ages than of the early Renaissance. His idea of the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—was typical of medieval understanding of chemistry, but he went further than most medieval scholars through experimentation and critical translation of classical manuscripts. Pietro was also an eager collector of new information. He left record of an interview with the explorer Marco Polo held shortly before the latter returned to Venice in 1295. Pietro inquired about natural phenomena and drugs such as camphor, aloe, and brazil, which were imported from Asia. He made no mention of magic or other supernatural matters.

Pietro is often called a disciple of the Arabic scholar Avicenna and even more so of Averroës, whose ideas he is supposed to have introduced into Europe. Pietro's ideas about the stages of disease—onset, increase, fullness, and decline—correspond to those of Avicenna, as does his preference for simple, natural medicines. Scholar Lynn Thorndike, however, argues quite effectively that the supposed influence of Averroës has no basis in Pietro's writings. Averroës' ideas about chemistry were more sophisticated than those of medieval Europeans such as Pietro, and Thorndike finds no reason to think that Pietro's theological ideas came from the same source. Other writers, however, suggest that Pietro's adoption of a corruption of Averroës' idea of the soul was one of the principal sources of his trouble with the Church.

In addition to numerous translations from Arabic and Greek, Pietro wrote at least ten books. The most famous is the *Conciliator differentiarum philosophorum et praeceptue medicorum* (1472; conciliator of the various medical philosophies and practices), in which he attempted to reconcile the teachings of Greek, Arabic, Jewish, and Latin writers in philosophy and medicine. Although done with the usual medieval resort to authority and syllogism, this work contains much original comment and makes clear Pietro's deep commitment to astrology.

Pietro's second major work, *De venenis eorumque remediis* (1473; English translation, 1924), is a description of all important known poisons with descriptions of symptoms and antidotes or treatments. Reportedly done for a pope—possibly John XXII—it too is a mixture of astrology and superstition, but the listing of poisons and symptoms is well done.

Pietro's writings other than translations are *Expositio problematum Aristotelis* (1475; exposition of Aristotelian problems), *Hippocratis de medicorum astrologia*



Pietro d'Abano. (Library of Congress)

*libellus Graeco in Latinum* (1476; Hippocrates's astronomical medicine translated from Greek to Latin), *Textus Mesue emendatus Petri Apponi medici in librum* (1505; the text of Mesue amended by Dr. Pietro d'Abano), *Astrolabium planum, in tabulis ascendens, continens qualibet hora atque minuto aequationes domorum coeli, significationes* (1502; clear astronomical tables, containing the heavenly signs for any hour and minute), *Joannis Mesue additio* (1505; additions to John Mesue), *Decisiones physiognomicae* (1548; judging a person's character by physical features), *Geomantia* (1549; *Magical Elements*, 1655), and *De balneis* (1553; on baths). Many of these works were considered authoritative into the sixteenth century.

Although the details are in some dispute, Pietro's return to Padua from Paris seems to have been marked by serious trouble with the Church. Either shortly before or after his arrival in Padua, Pietro was accused of heresy and necromancy. The charges were made through the Dominican order of friars and were based on reports of a physician named Petrus de Reggio. There are a number of reported accusations, including that he used magic to get all the money he spent returned to him, that he

claimed that some biblical miracles had natural explanations, and that he adhered to the rationalistic philosophy of Averroës. Charged with several others, Pietro had to face the Inquisition. Thanks to the intervention of influential patrons—there is one report that Pietro went to Rome and won the support of Pope Boniface VIII—he was exonerated in 1306. In 1314, Pietro was offered the chair of medicine at the new University of Treviso, but he fell ill and died before he could move there. His death was fortuitous in one sense, for in 1315, the charges of heresy were renewed. Posthumously, he was condemned and orders were issued for the exhumation and burning of his body. Although most authorities maintain that friends spirited the body away to a new tomb and only an effigy was burned in the public square of Padua, Thomas of Strassburg, Augustinian prior general, claims to have seen the body burned. The distinction seems academic at best.

Thorndike, who has made the most thorough study of Pietro, rejects much of the story of his troubles with the Inquisition. It was, Thorndike argues, constructed of whole cloth in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Pietro may have had one brush with Church authorities, but the embellishments about the body being spirited away have no basis in original sources. Thorndike is not even convinced that Pietro died on the traditionally accepted date of 1316 and suggests that he may, in fact, have taught for some years at Treviso after that date. Thorndike's arguments are well marshaled, but they have not been widely adopted by other scholars.

#### SIGNIFICANCE

Pietro was a medieval scientist, but he showed some of the qualities that would mark the Renaissance as well. His critical attitude and experimental approach were signs of the future. The importance he placed on astrology and prayer as elements in medical prescriptions, however, harked back to the past.

Pietro played an important role in the development of Padua and its university into a major intellectual center. Although in the thirteenth century the University of Padua was known mostly for the study of law, by 1500 it could boast of having had many of the major scientists of the Italian Renaissance as professors or students. Pietro founded the Paduan school of medical thought, introducing both classical and Arabic sources. His willingness to question established views and to seek new information rather than depending wholly on authority was important in shaping the growing scholarly tradition of Padua.

—Fred R. van Hartesveldt