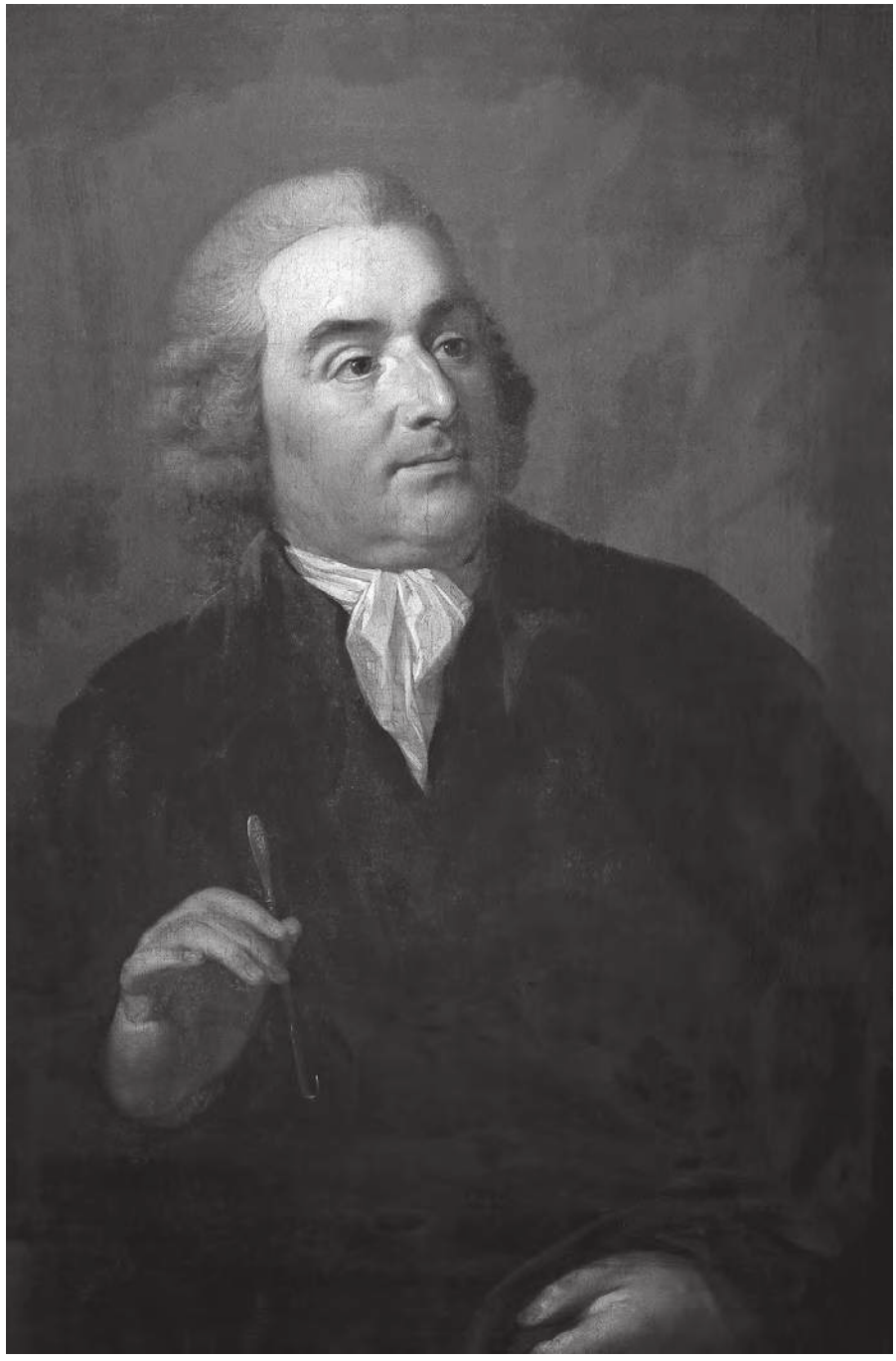
Petrus Camper in context



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Science, the arts, and society in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic

Klaas van Berkel & Bart Ramakers (eds.)

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Petrus Camper in context
An introduction

Klaas van Berkel & Bart Ramakers

Without doubt, Petrus Camper (1722-1789) was the most important medical scientist in the Netherlands in the era after the death of Herman Boerhaave (1738). Camper studied medicine at Leiden University with the pupils of Boerhaave, but he later went his own way and became an enormously popular professor of medicine in his own right. Just two years after having been appointed professor of philosophy, anatomy, and surgery at the University of Franeker (1749), he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in London. In 1755 he moved to Amsterdam, where he instructed the local surgeons while also teaching anatomy and surgery at the Athenaeum. Based on his studies of human anatomy he published his renowned *Demonstrationum anatomico-pathologicarum liber primus* in 1760 (a second volume was to follow in 1762). After his appointment as professor of theoretical medicine, anatomy, surgery, and botany at the University of Groningen in 1763, his interests widened substantially. He lectured on the similarities between animals and plants, published on small-pox inoculation and comparative physiology, set up a polyclinic for the poor, experimented with the treatment of cattle plague, and publicly dissected animals and human bodies for the local elite. Even after the end of his academic career in 1773 he continued his medical research. He expanded his already well-known cabinet of anatomical, zoological, and botanical preparations and published in the fields of palaeontology and comparative anatomy. His much-acclaimed study of the facial angle in human beings contributed to the foundation of physical anthropology. It came as no surprise that in 1785 Camper was elected as an *associé étranger* of the Academy of Sciences in Paris, the first Dutchman after Boerhaave to receive this honour.

Yet Camper was much more than just a physician or a medical professor of international acclaim. For instance, he was a prolific writer in popular journals, where he published his ideas on pressing social problems. There he showed himself to be an independent thinker with original ideas concerning slavery, racial differences, and the place of women in society. Camper was also regarded as an expert in aesthetic matters and his drawings were much admired. His artistic talents and expertise even earned him the position of ad-

visor in the building of a new city hall in Groningen. Furthermore, as was said before, Camper was very much concerned with using his scientific skills in solving societal problems. In 1770 he devoted much of his time to finding a cure for the cattle plague that was raging through the Dutch Republic. Finally, he became involved in politics, both on a regional and a national level. Therefore we would not do him justice if we only considered him to be a medical expert. In a sense, Camper belongs to the few people in the second half of the eighteenth century who, so to say, defined the Enlightenment, at least in the Netherlands.

Still, practically all students of Camper's life and work have thus far focused on the medical aspects of his career. The two major biographies of Camper, by C.E. Daniëls in the nineteenth century and by J.K. van der Korst in the early twenty-first century, were both written by prominent medical doctors, who treated Camper as a former colleague. Others have devoted book-length studies to related topics such as Camper's views on zoology (Rob Visser) and physical anthropology (Miriam Claude Meijer), but comparable studies have not been devoted to the other occupations of this very versatile intellectual. The collection of essays that was published on the commemoration of Camper's death in 1989 (*Onderzoeker van nature*) only contains some indications of what remains to be done on Camper's work before we can begin to construct a balanced account of his life. Students of Camper agree that it is about time to 'de-medicalise' Camper – that is, to give equal weight to aspects of Camper's life other than his medical expertise. This is not meant to say that enough has been done on Camper as a physician or a medical expert. There is still a lot of archival material that awaits scrutiny by someone well versed in the details of medical science and the complexities of the medical profession during the eighteenth century. Also, Camper's views on issues that do not belong to hard-core medicine, like his interest in social and forensic medicine, have just begun to be explored. But most urgently needed are detailed studies of 'the other Petrus Camper': Camper the artisan, Camper the artist, Camper the expert on art and architecture, Camper the (creative) author, Camper the politician, Camper the 'philosophe', and Camper the landowner. This is what this volume is hoping to achieve, striking a new balance in the study of Petrus Camper by directing our attention to 'the other Camper'.

The first chapter, by Pieter Caljé, deals with a period in Camper's life that has not been studied thoroughly thus far: his stay at the University of Franeker from 1750 to 1755. Franeker, founded in 1585, only a decade after the opening of the University of Leiden, had long been the second-most-important university in the Dutch Republic. Yet, during the second half of the eighteenth century, it went into decline and had to give precedence to Utrecht and Groningen. The number of students declined substantially and Franeker was

no longer able to attract the kind of professor that was in demand in the late eighteenth century, that is, the professor who did not excel in erudition so much, but tried to make himself useful for society. Caljé analyses how Camper did or did not fit this process, and more precisely how Camper's essentially modern teaching affected the number of students and the number of medical graduations at Franeker in the 1750s. Was there a 'Camper effect' at Franeker? The answer is 'yes', but since the medical faculty was not the most important of the higher faculties, the 'Camper effect' was not enough to reverse or even stop the university's trend of declining student enrolment.

Caljé also touches upon the political role that the elder Camper tried to play in Friesland, mainly during the period of the so-called Patriots (the 1780s), which was particularly detrimental to the University of Franeker. This political aspect of Camper's career is studied in much more detail by Goffe Jensma. In 1756, through his marriage to Johanna Bourboom, the widow of the Harlingen regent and rich landowner Doede Vosma, Camper entered the world of Frisian politics. Drawing from understudied source material, Jensma gives a detailed account of how Camper got accepted into this world and what his new riches amounted to – both in financial and in political terms, since voting rights were tied to landed property. Jensma convincingly argues that Camper's new role in Frisian society tied the young medical professor permanently to Friesland and the northern provinces. He also shows that the management of Camper's farms and even more so his pursuit of political power both in Friesland and on a national level took much time away from his medical research. Seen in this light, according to Jensma, Camper was much more an ordinary Frisian regent who dabbled in science than a medical scientist who happened to have married a rich widow.

This essentially political reading of Camper's career is taken up by Klaas van Berkel in his chapter on Camper and the limits of the Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic. As a university professor in Groningen, Camper became involved in a highly politicised affair concerning the radical professor of law Frederik Adolf van der Marck (1719-1800). By claiming the right to judge Holy Scripture according to the rules of right reason and by supporting the mission of some of his more radical former students to limit the rights of the Dutch Reformed Church to only spiritual matters (even depriving the Church of the right to appoint and fire ecclesiastical officials), Van der Marck had seriously and perhaps recklessly antagonised the more orthodox wing of the Dutch Reformed Church. When in 1772 four ministers filed a complaint with the Academic Senate, the professors at Groningen, including Camper, had to take a stand. It is quite revealing how Camper acted. Although he fundamentally agreed with Van der Marck, during his stay in Groningen Camper always kept his distance from him and now, during Van der Marck's trial, he

felt he had no other choice than to vote against the law professor. He thus actively supported the dismissal of a colleague whose views he basically shared. Only political considerations can explain his odd behaviour – more precisely, Camper's wish to keep his political network in Groningen and The Hague intact. Politically Camper was a reformist and intellectually he belonged to the moderate Enlightenment, but the Van der Marck affair clearly shows that Enlightenment ideas in the end were subject to limits set by political expediency. This is one more argument why a political biography of Camper is urgently needed.

The next three chapters all deal with Camper's many personal friendships and intellectual contacts throughout Europe. A true friend was the moral philosopher and bureaucrat François Hemsterhuis, a son of a former Franeker professor of classics and the man who may very well have introduced Camper in Friesland. Although, as Jacob van Sluis points out, the two of them differed in many respects – Hemsterhuis was contemplative, Camper was leading a more active life; Hemsterhuis was courteous and polite, Camper could be rude for no reason at all – they remained friends from their shared student days at Leiden University to Camper's death. As is evident from Hemsterhuis's correspondence with Princess Gallitzin, wife of a former Russian ambassador to the Dutch Republic, the philosopher showed great admiration for Camper's political ingenuity and Camper profited significantly from Hemsterhuis's contacts with princes, diplomats, and administrators. These letters, however, also contain highly revealing descriptions of Camper's physical, moral, and mental condition, unobtainable from other sources. Only after Camper's death did Hemsterhuis realise the true nature of the bond that had existed between them for so long. It was the most perfect social friendship that was possible, but it was nothing like the congeniality that existed between Hemsterhuis and the princess.

Hemsterhuis was a homebody who seldom left The Hague, but Camper is known for his many travels. Some of these travels proved to be decisive for Camper's career in medicine. Among the countries he visited, as Andrew Cunningham makes clear, England was perhaps Camper's favourite destination. Around 1750, in the eyes of many, England stood on the brink of becoming the dominant economic and political power in Europe. As a consequence, whereas in former times Englishmen had to travel to the Continent to stay abreast of the latest developments in science and medicine, after 1750 the tables turned. Now aspiring scholars from the Continent had to cross the Channel to England to learn something new. Camper felt very much at home in the world of the English gentleman virtuoso and met everyone who was anyone within that circle. Cunningham especially considers his interest in and contribution to midwifery. Already on his first visit to London in 1749 Camper be-

came a student of the Scottish man-midwife William Smellie, who introduced the use of the forceps in obstructed births. Dexterity in using the forceps was becoming the medical doctor's key to the lying-in room of his more wealthy clients. But Camper did not only absorb the new knowledge, he also added to it. Being both an experienced midwife and a skilful draughtsman, Camper contributed some highly novel illustrations to Smellie's *Sett of anatomical tables* (1754), his important first atlas of midwifery.

Another traveller to England was the German medical doctor Samuel Thomas Soemmerring (1755-1830), who on his way to the British Isles in 1778 met Camper in Klein Lankum, near Franeker, and received letters of recommendation from him. Reinhard Hildebrand discusses their relationship and shows that establishing contact with a rising star among the German naturalists like Soemmerring was crucial for Camper in extending his network in the German lands. In analysing Camper's correspondence with protégés like Blumenbach, Forster, and others, Hildebrand offers a rich and in a way moving portrait of Camper, *der Alte* (the old man), as these admirers lovingly called him. By also paying attention to the style in which his letters are written, Hildebrand is able to demonstrate how close Camper's ties with his correspondents really were. In the end, however, Camper's influence on the development of German science remained negligible. Though Goethe may have called Camper 'a meteor of intellect, science, talent and activity', Camper's most intimate German friend, Soemmerring, preferred to work in the physiological tradition of Albrecht von Haller. Camper held on to the notion that physiological knowledge could only be derived from anatomical facts, whereas Soemmerring was more interested in topics like irritability and sensibility. Thus Camper's correspondence with Soemmerring and others reveals an essential limitation of his excellence in anatomy, making him unresponsive to new trends in medical research.

Nevertheless, Camper's reputation as one of the greatest anatomists of his days had been firmly established, not just among his fellow scientists at home and abroad but also among the educated classes at large, certainly in the Dutch Republic. He very much fashioned himself as a public scientist, nothing short of having celebrity status. It was not only by depth and breadth of subject matter that Camper reached this fame, but also through the discursive manner in which he dealt with these topics, in lectures open to the general public and in Dutch-language articles that were published in scientific as well as in general-interest and spectatorial journals. Bart Ramakers makes a foray into the pragmatics of Camper's manner of communicating by analysing five of his publications: one on the origin and skin colour of black Africans, one on the form and design of good shoes, and three on symphysiotomy. Whereas students of Camper typically (and understandably) focus on the

content of his writings, Ramakers primarily addresses their genre and rhetorical format. Applying distinctions designed by the Swedish sociolinguist Britt-Louise Gunnarsson, he demonstrates how the structure, format, and style of each of Camper's publications depend on the relationship between his aims on what is called the cognitive, social, and societal level of scientific communication. Camper seems to have been very much aware of the fact that convincing his audience was both a matter of being right and of being judged to be right.

Given the close relationship that existed in the eighteenth century between the sciences on the one hand and the arts and letters on the other, it seems nothing short of obvious to study Camper as a practitioner and theoretician in each of these three fields. As far as the visual arts are concerned, it was with the help of comparative anatomy – possibly his most favoured discipline – that Camper ventured to develop a practical method for the creation of ideal (anatomical) beauty, be it in drawing, painting, sculpture, or architecture, as well as to establish a natural, scientific principle on which beauty should be based. Three chapters in this volume deal with Camper's aesthetic ideas, each concentrating on different aspects and artistic fields. All three take their lead from a set of Dutch lectures Camper held before the Amsterdam drawing academy that are illustrative of his aim to reach a wider than exclusively scholarly audience, valorising his findings from literally hundreds of autopsies and dissections.

What these findings amounted to is shown by Miriam Claude Meijer, who traces the steps that led to Camper's facial angle theory and sets the stage, so to speak, for the art historical chapters that follow hers. It was Camper's explicit goal, he said in one of his Amsterdam lectures, to combine 'the exacting and in every respect disgusting Dissections of Animals with the beautiful and graceful Art of Painting'. As a professor of anatomy at the Amsterdam Athenaeum and as prelector at the city's College of Surgeons, Camper had ample opportunity to examine corpses of both human beings and animals. He became particularly interested in skulls, taking the inclination of the so-called facial line of humans, humanoids, and other animals as indicative of their gradual variation. He considered the facial angle as proof of the existence of what the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), called the *moule intérieur*, the formative principle of life. However, unlike Buffon, Camper attributed particular anatomical differences to climatological instead of artificial modification. What's more, he opposed the Frenchman in that he refused to describe variation between black and white people in terms of degeneration whereby the latter represented the ideal standard. Camper in no way intended his facial angle theory to support racism. On the contrary, Meijer, like Ramakers in his previous chapter, demonstrates how he spoke out firmly against it.