

Henri Joseph REGA

Born: April 26, 1690 – Leuven (Belgium)

Died: July 22, 1754 – Leuven

Henri Joseph Rega is the son of a prosperous merchant, owner of a laundry near the mill of Redingen.

After his secondary studies, he registers in 1707 at the university at the age of 17 as a student of physics and medicine. On the 7th of April 1712, he graduates as a licentiate of medicine and pursues his studies of chemistry, anatomy and surgery in Paris. On his return to his hometown, he runs for the vacant chair of chemistry. After having rejected a second candidate, the faculty advises in favor of Rega and his nomination takes effect on the 13th of June 1716 and two years later he obtains the title of doctor. Almost immediately he starts teaching anatomy and subsequently medicine. As a professor of medicine he earns a higher stipend than a professor of chemistry.

An influential and critical scholar

Rega is a great physician and is often referred to as “the Boerhaave of Leuven”. Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738) was like Rega also professor of medicine, botany and chemistry, but at the University of Leiden. Both achieve fame and acquire richness and relations thanks to their successful medical career.

Both cling to the mechanical medicine, and are opposed to the iatro-chemists. This viewpoint manifests itself in Rega’s first publication, the treatise “*De Sympathia*” published in Haarlem in 1721, in which he stresses the importance of the mutual influencing (sympathy) of the different body-tissues in the fields of physiology, pathology and diagnostics. He runs counter to the iatro-chemical (chemiatic) belief that the degeneration (thickening) of the blood is due to the blood turning acid. Rega shows that the acidity is caused by external factors and he figured out that iatro-chemical drugs are useless.

During a lecture about uroscopy as a means of diagnosing a sickness, he shows that this is impossible using urine as the one and only reference and he has a go at the cunning and deviousness of the so-called “water-casters”. Rega does not spurn uroscopy, but more orthodox scientific methods take the place of the “*piskijkerij*”. In his laboratory he is busy with urine analysis and in 1733 he publishes a treatise “*De urinis tractatus duo*”.

In 1740 the governess Maria Elizabeth of Austria (1680-1741) wants him, in cooperation with the professors De Villers (1701-1759) and Sassenus (1672-1756), to analyse the spring water of

Mariemont. Rega's report shows that the water is very pure and due to its contents of iron is fit for medicinal purposes. The spring on the propriety of the governess is a fully fedged match for the spring water of Spa, situated in the principality of Liege.

His book "*Acurata medendi modus*" (1737) is a compilation of the medical knowledge at the end of the 18th century and contributes to Rega's international reputation..

A benefactor of the university ...

He is twice dean of the university: in 1719 and 1722.

Out of his pocket he bears the cost of organizing the laboratory for chemistry and for physics. He also pays for the building an octagonal anatomical theatre, which will later on become the studio of the sculptor Constant Meunier and much later a protestant temple. He is closely involved with the foundation of "*Hortus Botanicus*" (1708-1719), the actual botanical garden.

Rega contributes to the revival of the University Library, from now on ruled by a new administration and qualifying for a regular income. The Rega-wing was built for its accomodation (between 1723 and 1725) behind the Hallen. On the 25th of August 1914 the German occupying forces, as a revenge for imaginary attacks by civilians, deliberately committed arson causing the destruction of the library building and the permanent loss of books of priceless value, among them a large part of the legacy of professor Rega's library.

... and for the town

As court-physician to Maria Elizabeth he uses his influence for realizations for the benefit of the university. He also looks after general Maurice of Saxony, field-marshal to Louis XIV (1638-1715) and Rega manages by his mediation of his former patient to save Leuven from an occupation.

At the age of 74, Henri Joseph Rega dies as an international famous scientist in Leuven on July 22 1754.