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Neurological stamp

Niels Stensen (or Steno) 1648–86

Niels Stensen was still a student when he discovered in 1661 the excretory duct of the parotid gland in sheep. This was later identified in humans by Sylvius. Stensen was the first to identify the heart as a muscle and to recognise the congenital cardiac defects later known as the tetralogy of Fallot. Stensen identified the cerebral grey and white matter and argued that it was idle to speculate about cerebral function when so little was known about its structure. He disagreed with the views of Willis on the location of certain higher functions such as memory, and of Descartes who considered the pineal gland to be the location of the soul that existed only in humans. Stensen showed that the pineal gland existed in other animals. He opposed the views of Borelli who believed that increased muscle bulk noted on contraction was due to a fermentation process generated by a discharge of liquid from the nerves.

Stensen was one of the founders of geology and he wrote important works on the production of strata, fossils and other geological formations. Brought up a Lutheran, Stensen converted to Catholicism in 1667 and gave up the study of science after he was ordained a bishop in 1677. He was one of the greatest intellects of his time, but died in extreme poverty.

Denmark honoured him with this stamp in 1969 on the 300th anniversary of the publication of his geological work *On Solid Bodies* (Stanley Gibbons 507, Scott 462).

L F HAAS

