

The Barber Surgeons as a class originated in the first half of the thirteenth century, and by the surgeon were given the right of bleeding and scarification. These being of a lower rank of surgery and yet wielding the knife, caused a certain amount of contempt at the hands of the physicians, so that in a short time the students of the faculties held as undignified most operations, except those for stone, hernia and cataract. Thus, gradually throughout Europe, general surgery fell into the hands of the Barber Surgeons. The St. Cosmo clique, however, through its royal edict became more or less fatal to the Barber Surgeons' practice in Paris, and this caused constant bickering, until 1390 the university took hold of the matter, especially the faculty of medicine, and readjusted conditions. Under Louis XI, Olivier le Dain, his barber and favourite, proved a dangerous adversary to the surgeons.

In 1494 the faculty in its teachings to the barber surgeons read certain authorities, chiefly Guy de Chauliac, to the class in Latin, followed by explanatory notes in French. In addition anatomy was demonstrated, and in order that this could be carried out, judicial permission was granted to purchase cadavers from the various gibbets. The barber surgeons gained further favour with the faculty by observing the statutes of the same and refraining from the practice of medicine unless under the advice of a physician, and when choosing a consultant, giving preference always to one of the masters of the faculty. By this means and owing to the bigoted policy of its order the power of the college of St. Cosmo was very much reduced, until in 1510 a rearrangement was made by the faculty and the two orders of surgery were stated definitely.

Outside the city of Paris the barber surgeons held the controlling hand in surgery. The chief orders were those of Montpellier, Tours, Rouen, Bordeaux and Toulouse. They became very aggressive, and so frequently usurped the rights of the physician, that in 1496 Louis XII, in a royal edict, limited their practice according to the laws of the university.

As to military surgery: In the army there was no surgical organization. According to the feudal system, each captain or noble recruited his men, and when he had the foresight to have a surgeon or surgeons in attendance, these were attached to his person and not necessarily to his troop. Even when the kings in the fifteenth century enlisted their armies no provision was made for a surgeon until 1405 this privilege was granted.

The surgeons of St. Cosmo would not leave their lucrative practice for the somewhat precarious existence in the field, and the barber surgeons then stepped in to fill the demand. Thus they gained in favour, an example of which might be cited in the case of Louis XI and his