After 400 Years, Still Hot on the Trail

Pool photo by Jacob Christensen Ravn/Aarhus University, via European Pressphoto Agency

Niels Linnerup of the University of Copenhagen examines the remains of Tycho Brahe in Prague on Tuesday.

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PRAGUE — Some contend it was a crime of passion committed by a jealous king. Others insist it was murder inspired by professional rivalry between two celebrated astronomers, one of whom poisoned the other with mercury. Or was it death by natural causes — a bursting bladder, perhaps?

Seeking to solve a 400-year-old mystery, this week a team of Czech and Danish scientists exhumed the body of the 16th-century Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe, whose celestial observations laid the groundwork for modern astronomy and who died in Prague in 1601, age 54.

After a week of sample-taking and tests, Brahe's remains...
were reinterred Friday in the crypt of Our Lady Before Tyn Church in Prague’s medieval Old Town Square, following a rousing Mass attended by an assortment of dignitaries, stargazing fans and archeologists, including Professor Jens Vellev, a self-styled Danish Indiana Jones who has traveled the globe seeking to demystify his hero.

Revered in both the Czech Republic and in his native Denmark, Brahe catalogued more than 1,000 new stars and his astronomical observations helped clear the way for later breakthroughs by his assistant, the German astronomer Johannes Kepler.

But it is the questions surrounding Brahe’s death that have captured the imagination of generations of sleuths and stumped historians for centuries.

Brahe, who sported a distinctive gold and silver prosthetic nose — having lost the bridge of his real nose in a duel — was long thought to have died after his bladder burst. Legend has it that 11 days before his death he attended the banquet of a nobleman and was too polite to leave the table to go to the toilet.

Medical experts have exploded this theory, noting that bladder ruptures are highly unusual and that Brahe probably died from kidney failure. But even today, when Czechs excuse themselves from the table to go to the bathroom, they have been known to say, “Pardon me, I don’t want to end up like Tycho Brahe.”

Suspicion of treachery has also fallen on Kepler, whom some have accused of murdering his mentor in order to pilfer his astronomical ideas. Kepler later used Brahe’s measurements to come up with the laws of planetary motion.

Others contend that Brahe was killed by his cousin Eric Brahe on the orders of the Danish king, Christian IV, enraged over rumors that Brahe, a father of eight, was having an affair with the king’s mother. The cousin supposedly slipped some mercury into Brahe’s glass, causing him to die in delirious pain.

Leading the quest for the truth is Mr. Vellev, an archeologist whose research into Brahe has taken him as far as China, where he said the last surviving replicas of the metal instruments Brahe used to measure the universe remain.

When not studying Brahe, Mr. Vellev delights in excavating ancient tombs in Abu Dhabi and medieval salt mines in his native Denmark.

Mr. Vellev, a professor at Aarhus University in Denmark, said it took him nearly 10 years to navigate Prague’s Kafkaesque bureaucracy and to persuade the local authorities and the priest at Our Lady Before Tyn Church to allow him to exhume Mr. Brahe’s body.

He said he appealed to their sense of history and justice, even as he insisted that he didn’t buy the murder theories surrounding Brahe’s death.

In his view, he said, it was more than likely that Brahe, an alchemist, may have taken a fatal overdose of mercury while self-medicating for his painful kidney ailment. Alternatively, he may have accidentally ingested mercury during the course of one of his experiments.
Brahe was born Tyge Ottesen Brahe in 1546 in Scania, then part of Denmark, and studied astronomy at the University of Copenhagen and in Germany. A cantankerous and sometimes misanthropic genius, Brahe worked at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II at a time when Prague was an imperial city.

Legend has it that, at age 20, he damaged his nose in a duel with a fellow member of the Danish gentry, Manderup Parsbjerg, not over a woman, but over some fine point of mathematics. He was said to employ a dwarf named Jepp as a jester and to keep a tamed elk as his pet.

In 1572, he detected a new star in the constellation Cassiopeia, a startling discovery at a time when the heavens were thought to be unchanging. The next year, he became the first astronomer to describe a supernova.

Brahe’s body was first exhumed in 1901 to try to determine the cause of his death, and samples of hair taken from his long, droopy moustache that were analyzed in the 1990s showed high levels of mercury. But Mr. Vellev said the samples from the first exhumation were insufficient and that the latest examination would allow scientists to examine a larger range of remains and to reproduce replicas of his bones and skull.

The results of the exhumation will be disclosed by next spring.

Mr. Vellev sought to play down the chances that a murder would be solved. Exhuming Brahe’s remains, he said, was as valuable for what it would show about his life as his death. For example, scientists will study his teeth to determine his diet (apparently, he liked a drink or two). DNA testing could also help determine whether rumors of a royal affair are well-founded and whether he could be the father of a Danish king.

“We may not get an answer and solve the mystery for certain,” Mr. Vellev said. “But I am more interested in learning more about the life of Tycho Brahe than about his death.”

The Czech and Danish team will use modern technology to analyze Brahe’s remains, including a CT scan taken of his bones, nose and teeth. They will also test the level of mercury on his moustache and beard, so prodigious that parts have survived the centuries.
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