

Was Tycho Brahe Murdered?

Martyn Shuttleworth 16.7K reads

Renaissance Astronomy and Hamlet

When we think of Renaissance scholars, we tend to think of dusty, pasty-faced scholars locked in darkened rooms, poring over ancient tomes and tinkering with alchemy equipment.

Part II: The Exhumation of Tycho Brahe - Renaissance Astronomy and Hamlet

This stereotype, in some cases, may have an element of truth, but it does many of the great Renaissance men a great disservice. Michelangelo was a rugged man, given to dressing in rags and he was renowned for his hot temper, once suffering a broken nose in a fight with a rival sculptor.

“When, according to habit, I was contemplating the stars in a clear sky, I noticed a new and unusual star, surpassing the other stars in brilliancy. There had never before been any star in that place in the sky.”

Tycho Brahe



Quiz:
Psychology 101 Part 2



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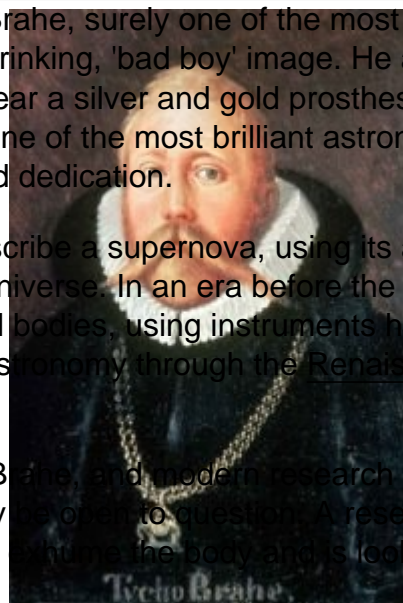
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Tycho Brahe – Living On the Edge

Another man who breaks the stereotype was Tycho Brahe, surely one of the most fascinating scholars of the Renaissance, renowned for his hard drinking, 'bad boy' image. He allegedly lost his nose in a drunken rapier duel, so he had to wear a silver and gold prosthesis. However, despite this questionable lifestyle, he was one of the most brilliant astronomers of all time, marrying natural intelligence with intuition and dedication.

Tycho Brahe, in 1572, was the first astronomer to describe a supernova, using its appearance to challenge the Ptolemaic, geocentric model of the universe. In an era before the invention of the telescope, his accurate measurements of celestial bodies, using instruments he designed himself, laid the groundwork for the development of astronomy through the Renaissance [1] and the Enlightenment [2].

However, controversy surrounds the death of Tycho Brahe, and modern research has shown that the official cause of death, a twisted bladder, may be open to question. A research team from Aarhus, Denmark, has been given permission to exhume the body and is looking at a new angle: Was Tycho Brahe murdered?



Portrait of Tycho Brahe (Public Domain)

The Life of Tycho Brahe

Tycho Brahe (1546 – 1601) was born in Scania, a region of Denmark that is now part of Sweden. His father, Otto Brahe, was a member of the Danish nobility, and he was taken in by his uncle, Jorgen Brahe, at the age of two. In 1559, at the age of 13, Tycho entered the University of Copenhagen, initially to study law, but he soon developed an interest in astronomy. The catalyst for this interest was the eclipse of August 21st, 1560, a phenomenon that had been predicted by astronomers, the accuracy of the eclipse forecasts impressing the young scholar deeply and determining his life course.

He purchased an astronomical book, known as an ephemeris, which gave the location of celestial bodies at different times. After studying this and many of the other available texts, he came to realize the weakness of astronomy; very few texts and astronomers agreed about certain phenomena, making it difficult to make observations. In 1563, he wrote that this piecemeal gathering of information held back progress and that a concerted, long-term to chart the heavens was essential.

an to take detailed measurements of celestial bodies, although this was not the young astronomer also motivated in his quest for accuracy and precision. After a dinner in Copenhagen, not long after, he looked up and saw the comet of 1577. Tycho immediately realized that the geocentric model proposed by Ptolemy must be wrong. The planets were not unchanging or fixed in a firm sphere, but they moved.

iques to measure the position of the star in Tycho Brahe's *Sky Map*, in Tycho Brahe's r

ement, looking at the star at

called the diurnal parallax to compare the distances of the stars. After establishing the

that the object was much further

that the object was hidden further

shed his belief that the star was

Rumors of murder resounded around Europe, with wild speculation and conspiracies dominating conversation in aristocratic circles, although there was little evidence to support these theories. That is, until 1991, when the Prague National Museum, with Brahe's mustache in its collection, sent a few hair samples to Denmark for analysis, in an attempt to establish the cause of death once and for all. The lab tests found that the hairs contained a huge amount of mercury, more than 100 times larger than the normal level expected in a body of that period.

This cause of death was believable, considering the lifestyle of Brahe, but modern researchers made interesting discoveries that cast some doubt upon this official story, creating a whodunit worthy of a Shakespearean play, with some literary historians speculating that the death of Tycho Brahe gave the Bard the idea for the play, Hamlet.

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Links

[1] <https://explorable.com/renaissance-science>

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