The Grave of Copernicus

Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543) was a Polish cleric and astronomer who became posthumously famous for having proposed that the earth and other planets orbited the sun, instead of the earth. Almost a century after the death of Copernicus, Galileo was put on trial for having promoted the ideas of Copernicus in his Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems. Copernicus himself had delayed publication of De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium, the work in which he described his heliocentric theory, until the year of his own death, to avoid the consequences of challenging the current religious dogma.. Because he had served as canon in the Roman Catholic cathedral in Frombork, Poland, he was thought to be buried in the cathedral, but his grave was not marked.

In 2005, skeletal remains thought to be those of Copernicus were unearthed from under the floor of the Cathedral. Forensic reconstruction of the skull suggested an elderly man with a broken nose and a scar over one eye. Because of the resemblance of the skull's features to existing portraits of Copernicus, the bones were tentatively identified as those of the astronomer.

However, the identification could not be verified, and a search was made for the grave of a maternal uncle, to provide a reference for DNA analysis. As it turned out the reference DNA was found, in 2008, among the belongings of Copernicus himself: hairs found in one of his books housed in a Swedish library. When DNA extracted from bones and a tooth of the skeleton were compared with DNA extracted from the hairs, DNA from two of the hairs perfectly matched that of the bones.

[Click here to read a news report](http://faculty.txwes.edu/mclark/Genome/Copernicus_Grave.pdf).