The Search for Tycho Brahe’s Nose

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Astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546-1601), Latinized name: Tycho Brahe) was not just an early geocentric. When he was drowned in 1901 to celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of his death (and to restore his grave), many people many people were easier to get a look at the famous metal insert that had been substituted the Brahe’s birth nose.

The Coming of the Nose

In 1572, as a student at the University of Copenhagen, Brahe observed a very bright star. He proved that it was a supernova located outside our solar system. Brahe’s later observations of the orbits of Cassiopeia and of a comet made clear that those objects, too, were located more distant than our moon. All this meant that — contrary to what many people believed — the heavens were changeable, not immutable as Aristotle had long ago postulated. Still, Brahe avoided painting a heliocentric view of the universe, he described the earth, rather than the sun, as being at the center of all things (heavenly).

To take up his studies, Danish student Tyge had moved from Copenhagen University to the German cities of Leipzig, Wittenberg and Rostock. There, he developed an interest in astronomy and mathematics. He soon became a successful mathematician. In 1572, he observed the new star Cassiopeia and in 1575, he became a lecturer for astronomy in Copenhagen. Shortly after that, he took up an invitation by Professor Robertus Friedrich 2nd to take up the lowest astronomical observatory of its time, the "Urania", on the island of Hven in the Sor near Copenhagen. From 1599 on, Brahe worked in Prague. In 1600, the German astronomer Johannes Kepler joined him. Kepler calculated planetary orbits — basing his calculations on Brahe’s meticulous observations, which Brahe had performed without a telescope.

The Going of the Nose

Tyco Brahe’s nose got lost, quite early, in a student fight. On December 10, 1566, Tycho and the Danish blue blood Mandersrud Parsberg were guests at an engagement party at Prof. Bachmesser in Rostock. The party included a ball, but the festive environment did not keep the two men from starting an argument that went on even over the Christmas period. On December 29, they finished the matter with a rapier duel. During the duel, which started at 7 p.m., in total darkness a large portion of the nose of Brahe was cut off by his opponent. It was the most famous cut in science, if not the wisest.

The Second Coming of the Nose

In those times in Germany (and also in Austria), it was socially okay — and even more than okay — to proudly show the sign honor. However, to cover the — as in this case extreme and unusual — displeasure, Tycho ordered a substitute nose made of a dummy from a mixture of silver and gold. This was unusual, because in those days when someone lost a nose in that part of Europe, wildly unusual as it may sound to modern ears — it was typically made of wax. (This was not as unusual and attempt to obtain replacements.)

One of Brahe’s pupils, Willem Janssone Blaeu (the name was also spelled Wilhelm Janszoon Blaauw), who lived with Brahe’s Ape, there’s the rub — a nasty praze to pay for a hot-blooded fight.

Figure 1: Braho with his damaged nose, as it may have appeared.

Figure 2: Brahe with his damaged nose, a little beautiful — but this time with the real form of his eyes. This portrait is from a handcoloured print in the copies of Astronomiae Instauratae Mechanicae that Tycho gave to noblemen of Europe. See that Tycho’s right eye is bigger than his right eye after many observations. Wundesburg 1566. For further details, see http://www.nesda.kth.se/lhec/tycho/index.html

A Side Note on Duels

By the way, duels by rapier or pistol did not or die out in Germany until the nineteenth century, despite being severely forbidden by law. Even the German Head of the State Bismarck, who took part in many duels as a

Student, in all seriousness asked the famous professor of medicine Rudolf Virchow for a duel in 1865. The two were political rivals, and Bismarck felt that Virchow had disrespected him by accusing Bismarck of not having read a report relating to the addition of the German navy. The man did not duel, and so were able to go through life with noses intact.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 3: Brahe’s cranium 300 years after his death.