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The Bones of a King

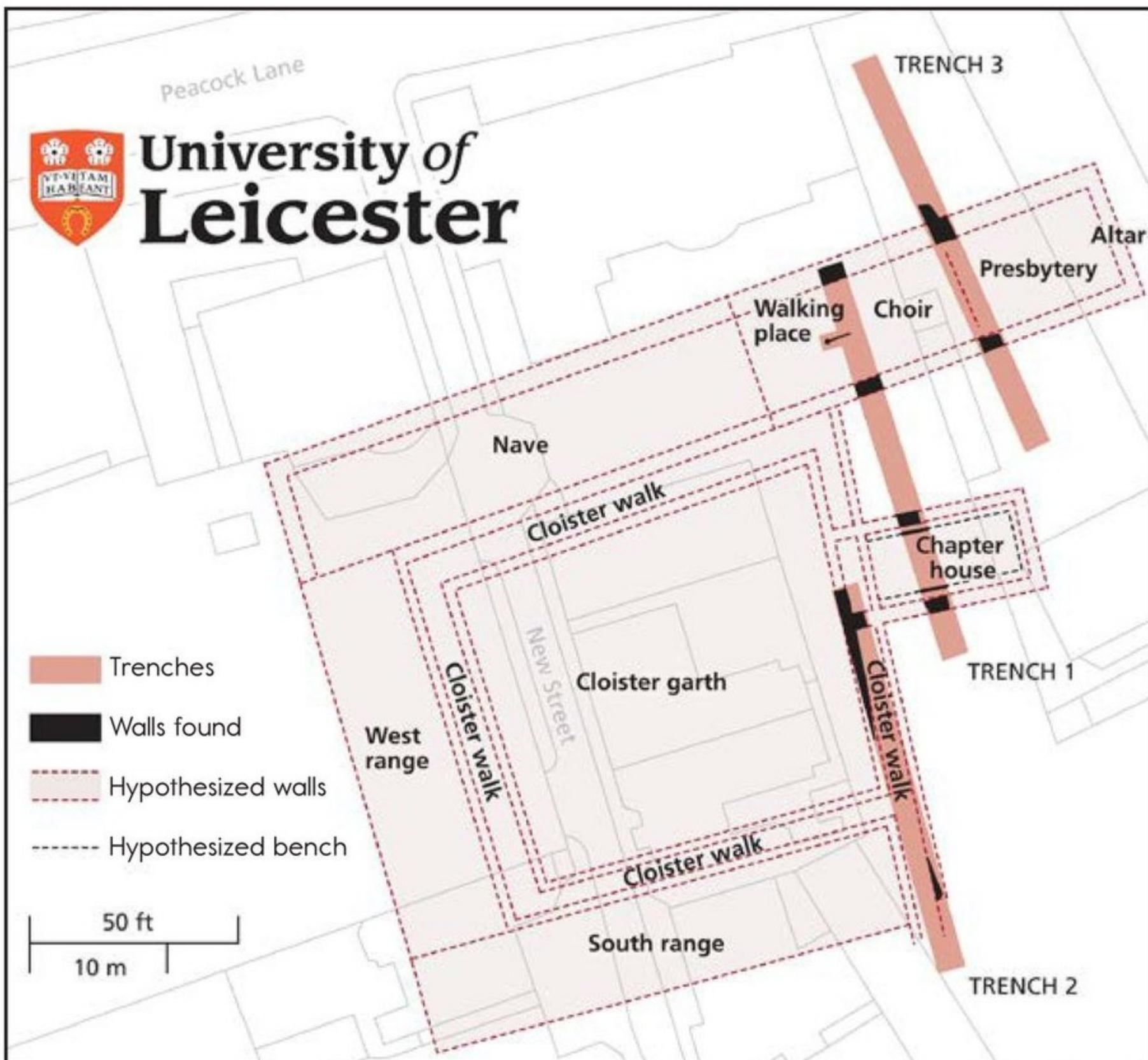


Written by Karen Mockler

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An approximate floor plan of Greyfriars Abbey shows how it may have looked before it was destroyed about fifty years after the death of Richard III.

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A member of the search team uses ground penetration radar (GPR) at Greyfriars parking lot to locate Richard III's grave site.

Under the Parking Lot

The ancient skeleton lay buried in the middle of town—not in a coffin, or even in a cemetery, but beneath a parking lot. An **archaeologist** gently scraped away the dirt that hid the skeleton’s spine.

The burial spot was strange, but then so was the spine, for two reasons. First, the spine was crooked, with a striking S curve. Second, this particular spine belonged to a famous king.

Before that fall day in 2012 when researchers found the bones of King Richard III beneath a parking lot in Leicester (LES-ter), England, he had lain hidden for more than 525 years.

But how could the researchers know for sure that it was Richard? Ancient history led the way, and modern science followed.

Behind the Search

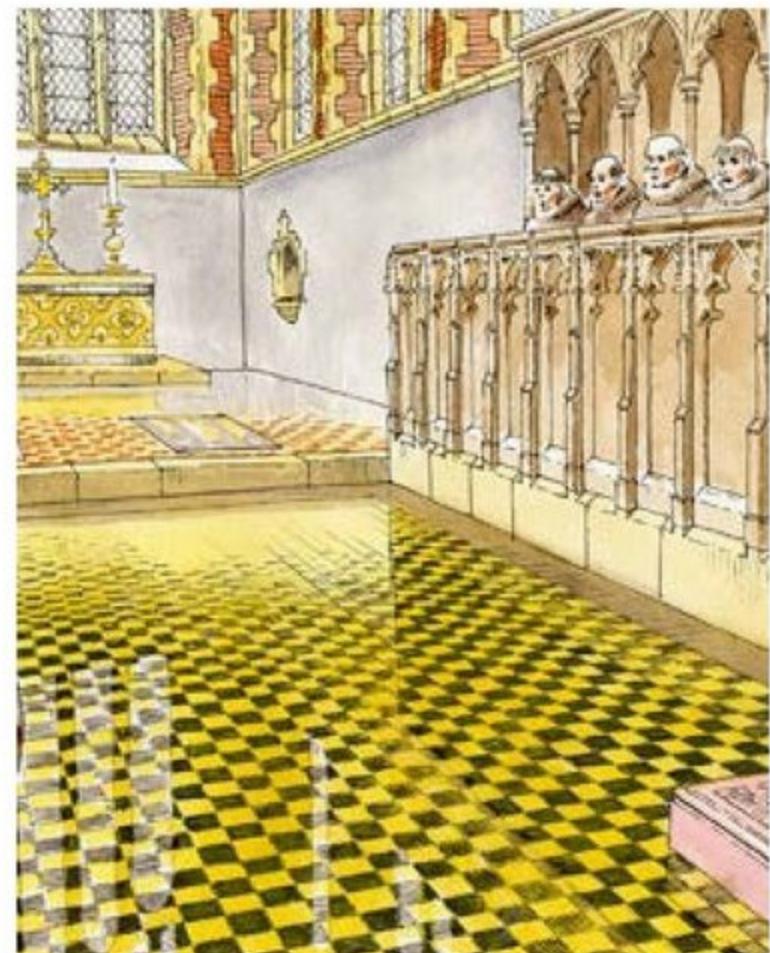
Finding the king's long-concealed body beneath a city parking lot wasn't an accident. Thanks to historical records, researchers knew that beneath that plain parking lot lay the buried ruins of the Greyfriars Priory, a **monastery** where Catholic monks lived from 1255 to the late 1530s. A **medieval** historian recorded Richard as having been buried in the priory after he died in battle at nearby Bosworth Field in August of 1485.

Richard's side had lost both the battle and the throne, so claiming his body was probably a brave thing for the monks to do. Signs indicate that he was buried quickly—his skull was jammed upright so he would fit in a grave that was slightly too small to hold his body. There was no coffin, and although the grave was in a position of honor near the church's high altar, it was unmarked and under the monastery floor.



Just over fifty years later, in 1538—as a direct result of who lost and who won that day—the abbey at Greyfriars was destroyed and, in time, covered over as the town grew. When modern researchers went looking for Richard, the church had been buried for nearly as long as he had. They consulted old maps, but in the centuries that followed the abbey’s destruction, street names had changed. It took some detective work to locate the precise burial site.

Even after they found the burial site, almost nobody expected the archaeologists to find a skeleton inside, not even the archaeologists themselves. By some ancient accounts, Richard’s body hadn’t been buried at all—but had instead been thrown in the River Soar after being paraded through the streets of Leicester.



Monks originally buried the king under the altar of the monastery.

As soon as archaeologists found the skeleton, though, they were pretty certain who it belonged to. When the bones expert saw the gash in the skull and then the twisted spine, she said the hair on the back of her neck stood up. This was King Richard III!



King Richard hoped that his brave charge toward Henry would inspire his troops to renew the battle and defeat Henry's forces.

Ancient History

Richard died in 1485 at the Battle of Bosworth Field, a few miles from Leicester. After leading a direct charge toward his enemy, Henry Tudor, Richard lost his horse on slippery ground, was overrun by Henry's soldiers, and lost his life. His crown fell alongside his body.



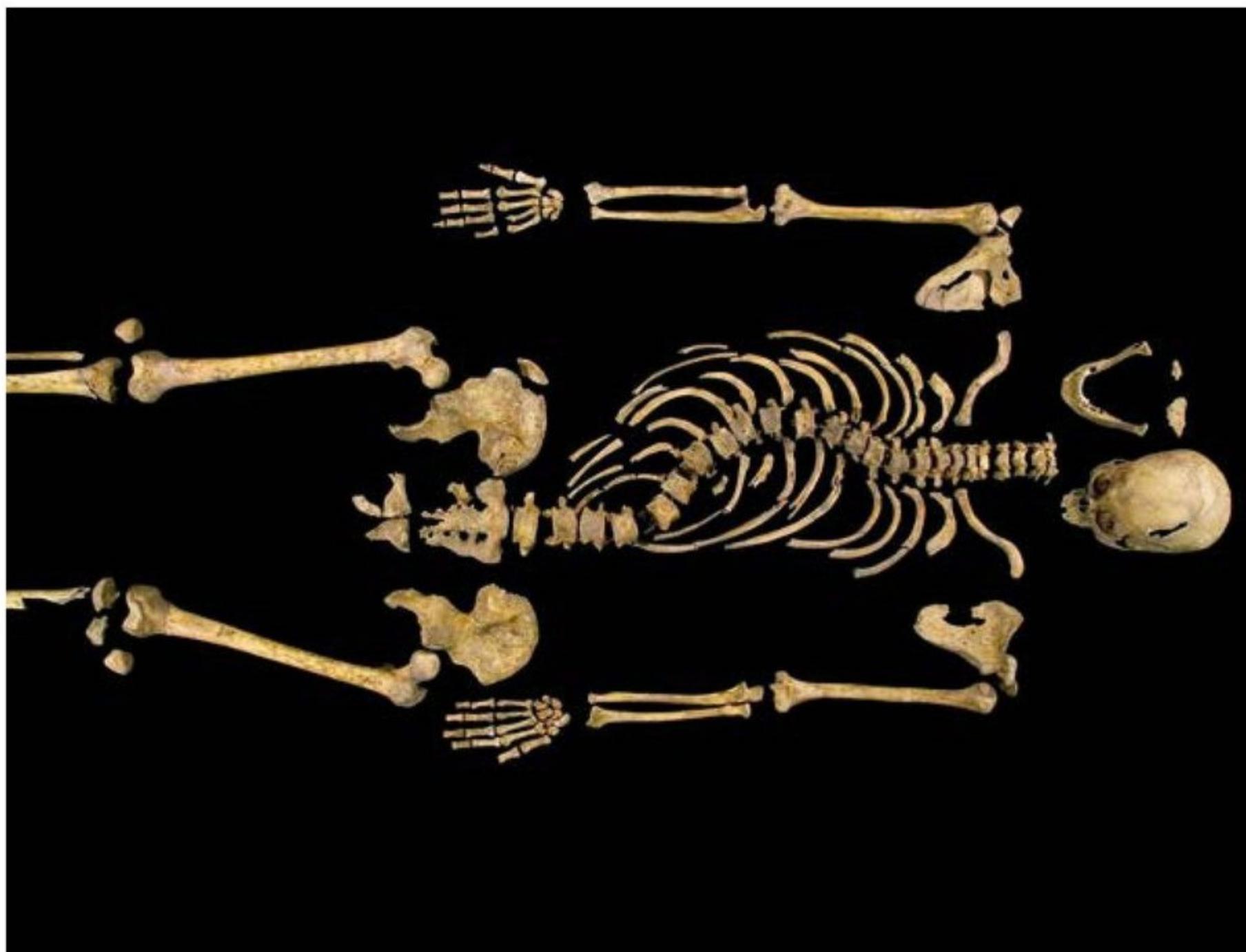
Betrayed by men he trusted, Richard III died on Bosworth Field.

Historical accounts of the battle mention the fatal blows that struck Richard. The skeleton under the parking lot showed similar signs of injury: ten blows, with eight to the skull. The wound that killed him was likely a large skull fracture behind his left ear. He was the last English king to fall in battle.



Henry Tudor led the triumphant procession that brought Richard back into town, his body slung over the back of a horse. Richard was left to lie in the town square for two days as proof that he was dead and Henry was now the king. This disrespectful display of his body also revealed his crooked back for all to see.

In Shakespeare's play *Richard III*, Richard is depicted as a hunchback with a raised right shoulder, something a crooked spine would cause. In the play, this **deformity** is more a cause for scorn than sympathy. In real life, it's another matter.



The skeleton of Richard III shows the distinct curvature of his spine.

At the time Richard's spine began to bend—probably between the ages of 10 and 12—doctors may have known the cause, but they certainly wouldn't have known how to help him. As a result, Richard's crooked spine made him stand inches shorter than his true height of five feet eight inches (tall for a medieval man). As an adult, he probably lived with near-constant pain.

Centuries later, we now know that Richard suffered from *scoliosis*. When archaeologists found his skeleton, they first lifted the arms, legs, and skull from the gravesite. When they finally reached the torso and saw the crooked spine, they knew they had found Richard.

Modern Science

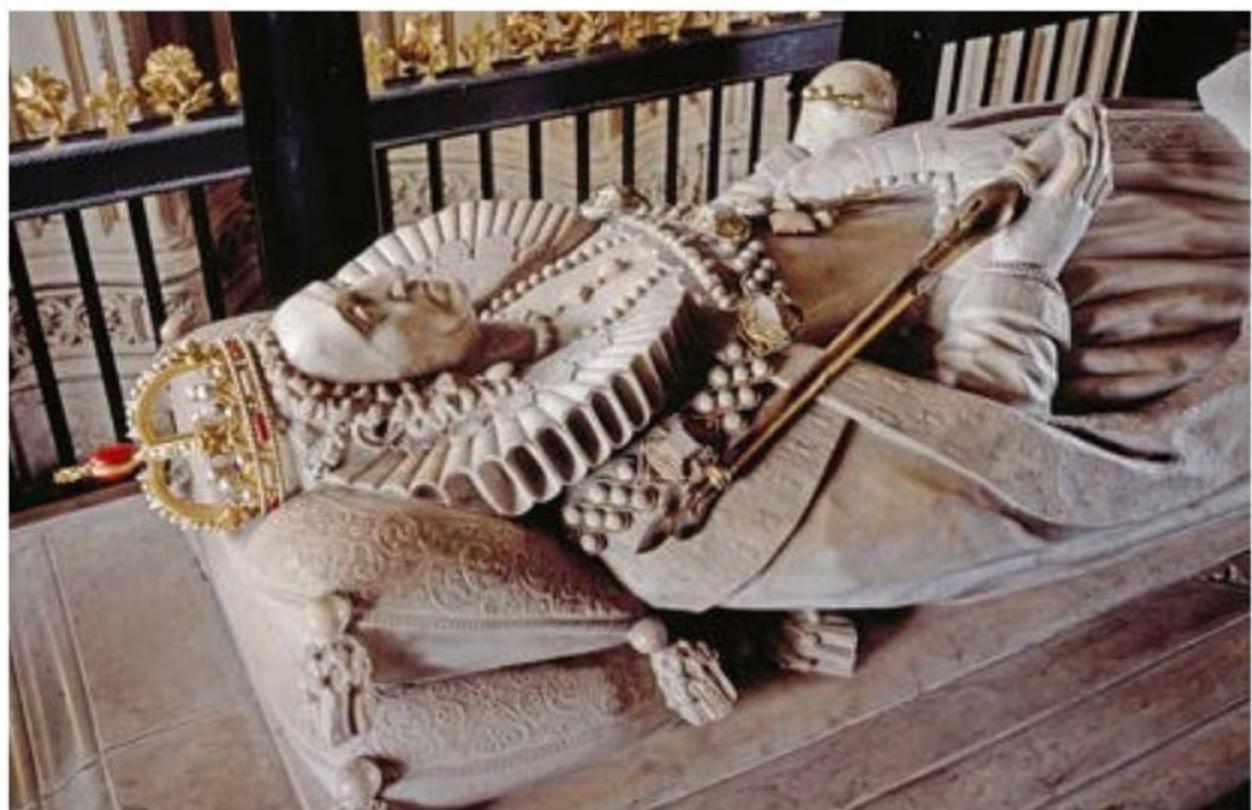
Everything ancient history could tell the researchers suggested that this skeleton belonged to Richard III. Now they turned to modern science for confirmation.

By studying the bones, scientists soon learned that they came from a man around the age of thirty-two—Richard's age when he died. They could also tell that the skeleton's owner had enjoyed a high-protein diet rich in meat and ocean fish. In the fifteenth century, only the wealthy (a king, for instance) ate that well. Finally, by using **carbon dating** tests on two ribs, they learned that the skeleton belonged to someone who died between 1455 and 1540. Richard died in 1485.



Michael Ibsen (left), is a seventeenth-generation descendant of Richard III's sister, Anne.

Scientists also considered **DNA**, the information in our cells that determines many of our traits. Less than 2 percent of the English population carries the particular type of DNA they took from the skeleton. When they took DNA samples from two modern-day **descendants** of Richard's sister, Anne of York, the samples matched.



The royal tomb of Queen Elizabeth I of England (1558–1603), considered one of England's greatest rulers. British monarchs are traditionally entombed in Westminster Abbey in London.

Honors for a King

With the recovery of Richard's bones, some people are delighted that the long-lost king can now be reburied with traditional honors. But where to bury him? Within twenty-four hours of DNA confirmation, two towns claimed his body.

In Leicester, officials want to bury the bones barely 100 yards from where they were found, in Leicester Cathedral. They want to open a visitors' center dedicated to Richard. Richard hails from the northern city of York, though, 100 miles north of Leicester. Some insist that Richard would have wanted to be buried there.

Other people feel strongly that Richard, regardless of his disputed place in English history, should be reburied in London's Westminster Abbey, along with other British **monarchs**. Wherever he ends up, his burial site will likely attract many tourists.

Villain or Victim?

Opinions are divided about what sort of man Richard was. We know that he met a violent end, but did Richard deserve what he got?

For centuries after his death, Richard was more **despised** than almost any other English king. Shakespeare's play *Richard III* depicts him as limping, deformed, and haunted. Yet Shakespeare never knew the king; he wrote the play more than a century after Richard died. Indeed, Shakespeare wrote during the reign of

the Tudors—Richard's enemies.

Some argue that both the Tudors and Shakespeare wronged Richard III, that he was a victim of their **propaganda**, and that what they said and wrote about Richard made him seem worse than he was.



Playwright William Shakespeare may have created a false image of Richard III.

We may never know for sure. What we do know is this: In 1483, Richard's older brother, King Edward IV, died, probably of pneumonia. Richard had always been loyal to his brother, so before Edward died, he named Richard to be the royal protector of his eldest son, who in time would have become Edward V of England.



No one knows the fate of the two young princes who were imprisoned in the Tower of London.

Instead, Richard ascended the throne and began to consolidate power for himself. He imprisoned his brother's two sons, Edward and Richard, in the Tower of London. The young princes were never seen again.

Two years into Richard's reign, the battle for control of England—between Richard's forces and the followers of Henry Tudor—took place at Bosworth Field. **Betrayed** by men he thought were his supporters, Richard was killed while fighting desperately on foot after losing his horse. His crown was picked up from where it had fallen, and Henry Tudor was crowned king of England on the battlefield, becoming King Henry VII. Years later, in 1534, Henry's son, Henry VIII, broke with the Catholic Church and dissolved the monasteries. This act led to the destruction and loss of Greyfriars Priory, where, centuries later, Richard's skeleton was uncovered.

The rest of the story is not so clear. After Henry VII took the throne, rumors raged about Richard and what might have happened to the two young princes in the Tower. Maybe Richard III ordered their murder. Maybe they lived for the two years Richard reigned as king, but were later killed by the new king, Henry VII, who had killed Richard. Maybe they were smuggled out of the country to safety.

Today, fans of Richard III believe that the discovery of his skeleton may cause people to change their opinions about this medieval king. They believe he had strong sympathy for the rights of the common people and that he established many principles of modern law. These include the ideas that defendants must be considered innocent until proven guilty, that defendants have a right to bail, and that all laws must be known and published.

What becomes of Richard now could change how his history is told. As the saying goes, “History is written by the victors.” After losing both his life and throne more than 525 years ago, Richard may have scored a significant victory after all, from a shallow grave hidden under a parking lot.

Glossary

archaeologist (<i>n.</i>)	a scientist who studies the remains of ancient cultures (p. 4)
ascended (<i>v.</i>)	moved upward; rose in position or rank (p. 14)
betrayed (<i>v.</i>)	hurt another in some way by being unfaithful, false, or disloyal (p. 14)
carbon dating (<i>n.</i>)	a test used to determine age that analyzes the amount of certain kinds of carbon in something very old (p. 11)
deformity (<i>n.</i>)	a condition in which part of a body or object appears abnormal (p. 9)
descendants (<i>n.</i>)	the offspring of a particular person or group that lived in the past (p. 11)
despised (<i>v.</i>)	disliked very much; hated (p. 13)
DNA (<i>n.</i>)	a code that carries genetic information about a living thing; abbreviation of <i>deoxyribonucleic acid</i> (p. 11)
medieval (<i>adj.</i>)	of or relating to the Middle Ages, the time period in European history from AD 500 to AD 1500 (p. 5)
monarchs (<i>n.</i>)	rulers of a kingdom or empire, such as kings or queens (p. 12)
monastery (<i>n.</i>)	a group of buildings where monks or nuns live and worship (p. 5)
propaganda (<i>n.</i>)	news, arts, or other media that often use false or exaggerated information to influence people (p. 13)

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Front cover: A wax likeness of King Richard III

Back cover: Archaeologist Mathew Morris in the trench where he found the skeletal remains of King Richard III under a parking lot in Leicester, England, in September 2012

Title page: The facial reconstruction made from the unearthed skull of Richard III

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