

# HISTORY NOW

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## Was the skeleton in the car park *really* Richard III?

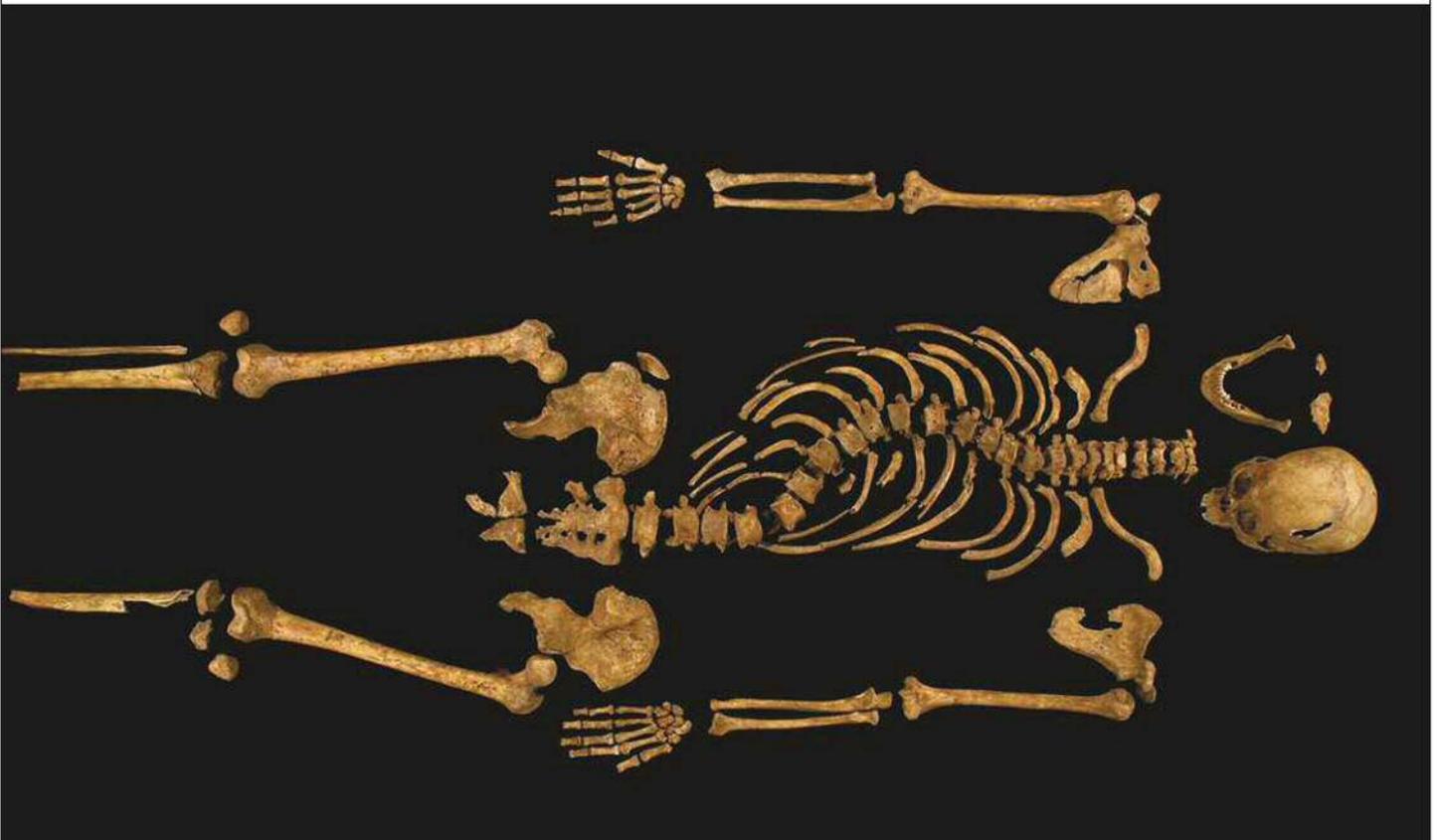
The discovery of the king's remains in Leicester in 2012 made worldwide headlines, but now experts have raised doubts about whether we can truly say the bones are his.

**Emma McFarnon** reports

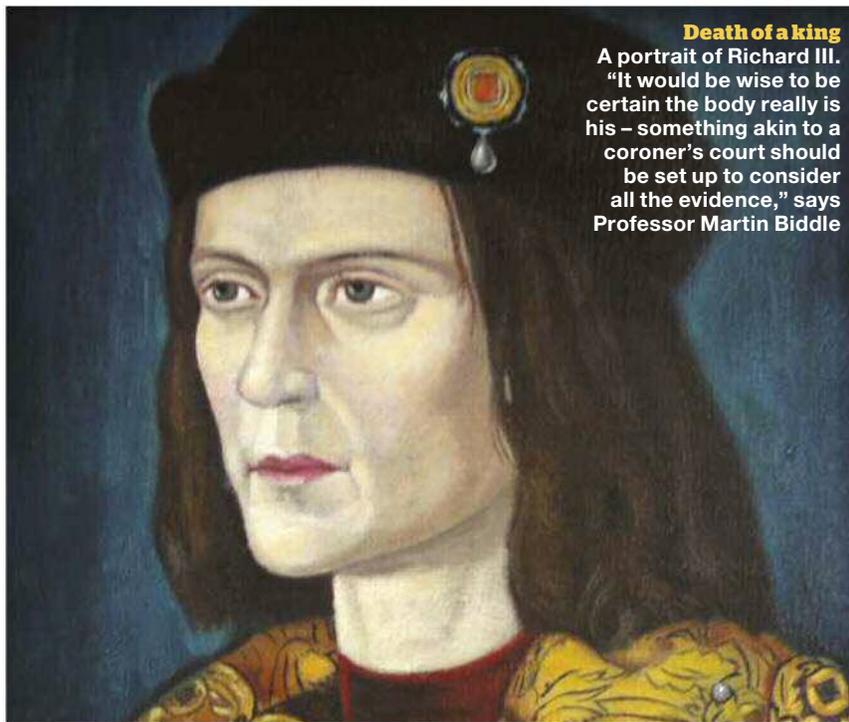
**A**rchaeologists “cannot say with any confidence” that bones found in Leicester are those of Richard III, leading experts have claimed.

Speaking exclusively to *BBC History Magazine*, Michael Hicks, head of history at the University of Winchester, and Martin Biddle, archaeologist and director of the Winchester Research Unit, raised concerns about the DNA testing, radiocarbon dating and damage to the skeleton. Biddle also notes that the team of archaeologists from the University of Leicester is yet to make excavation field records publicly available.

Hicks said he is not convinced that the remains are those of the king. Instead, he argues, they could belong to a victim of any of the battles fought during the Wars of the Roses, of which the 1485 battle of Bosworth – at which Richard was killed – was the last significant example. While the location of the grave in the former site of the Grey Friars priory matches information provided by John Rous, an associate of Richard's, Hicks notes that “lots of other people who suffered similar wounds could have been buried in the choir of the church where the bones were found”. He also queried the project's



**Grave doubts** This skeleton has been identified as that of Richard III, yet Michael Hicks has concerns about the strength of the claim. “It’s extremely rare that archaeologists find a known individual, let alone a king of England,” he says



**Death of a king**  
A portrait of Richard III. "It would be wise to be certain the body really is his – something akin to a coroner's court should be set up to consider all the evidence," says Professor Martin Biddle

use of radiocarbon dating, which dates the bones to the period of Richard's death. "Such a technique is imprecise," he said. "It will give you an era, but nothing more. In this case, it covers a period of 80 years."

Hicks raised concerns, too, about the prominence given to DNA testing in claims about the identity of the remains. "Mitochondrial DNA is traced through the maternal line, and does not change over time," he said. "Therefore, the DNA match from the Leicester skeleton could equally be the result of the bones being those of someone descended in the female line from Richard's mother, Cecily Neville, including her two daughters. It could also be those traceable from the other daughters of Cecily's mother, Joan Beaufort, any daughters of her grandmother Katherine Swynford, and so on.

"Joan Beaufort had 16 children, which made her the ancestor of much of the nobility of the Wars of the Roses – quite a few of whom died violently in those conflicts. There is some scientific debate about the accuracy of matching mitochondrial DNA in this way, but even if it is precise in this case, I'd argue it does not pinpoint these bones as Richard's.

"I'm not saying that it's *not* Richard – it's perfectly conceivable that it is – but we are not in a position to say with any confidence that it's him. Similarly, while the curved spine suggests the skeleton is Richard's, the presence of scoliosis does not represent conclusive proof. Indeed, it is very hard to prove that the skeleton

belongs to a specific person. The Leicester team themselves acknowledge that it's extremely rare for archaeologists to find a known individual, let alone a king."

Professor Biddle, emeritus fellow of medieval archaeology at the University of Oxford, also raised concerns. "While some evidence has been presented in peer-reviewed journals, it's the field records from the dig we need to see," he said. "I asked in a letter to *The Times* in 2012 for details about the shape and size of the grave pit but, as far as I know, this material is still not in the public domain.

"The skull was damaged during the excavations, and was later replaced more or less where it seemed to have been. Yet it is a cardinal rule of burial excavation that everything is left in position until the whole body has been uncovered. And, while the excavators say the feet were removed by an undefined Victorian disturbance, anyone viewing the Channel 4 documentary on the dig will see that the lower legs were hit and moved by a mechanical digger.

"We also know very little about the graves in the east end of the church. How many burials were made there in the

**"It's perfectly conceivable the skeleton is Richard III's, but we are not in a position to say with any confidence that it's him"**

three centuries of the friary's existence, and indeed after the battle of Bosworth? Without further excavation there is no way of knowing, and hence no certainty about the burial that it has been claimed was that of Richard III. Before all this goes any further, it would be wise to be certain the body really is his. Something akin to a coroner's court should be set up to consider all the evidence."

Philippa Langley, who commissioned and paid for the excavation, spoke to *BBC History Magazine* in response to Hicks' comments. She said: "Taking a sceptical view is good for vigorous debate, but to say it cannot be claimed 'with any confidence' that this is Richard is quite puzzling. Given the totality of the evidence, it can surely be said with considerable confidence. Hicks says that there may have been 'lots of people with similar wounds': perhaps he could name one who fits the bill?"

A spokesperson from the University of Leicester said: "The identification was made by combining different lines of evidence. These include the fact that the location of the grave matches the information provided by John Rous, and that the nature of the skeleton – the age of the man, his build, injuries and scoliosis – is in agreement with historical accounts. Biddle suggests that the skeleton's feet were damaged during the dig, but as they were not in the grave when we found it there *must* have been a prior disturbance.

"The radiocarbon dating places the skeleton to the period of Richard's death, and while the nature of his burial and grave is highly unusual for Leicester at the time, it fits with the known facts. Two direct female-line descendants of Richard's sister, Anne, were also found to share a rare mitochondrial DNA type with the skeletal remains.

"The strength of the identification is that different kinds of evidence all point to the same result. Hicks is entitled to his views, but we would challenge and counter them. Our forthcoming papers will demonstrate that many of his assumptions are incorrect. Our field records are also set to become available, as is normal procedure."

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