

# Italians think they have found Caravaggio's bones

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The remains of Italian painter Caravaggio are presented during a press conference in Ravenna, Italy, Wednesday, June 16, 2010. Researchers announced results of their year-long project, saying they have likely identified the remains of Caravaggio, 400 years after his death. However, they admit they can never be fully certain, saying the attribution can only be given with an 85 percent probability. (AP Photo/Enzo Russo)

Italian researchers believe they have found the remains of Caravaggio, but 400 years later some of the mysteries surrounding the death of the artist may never be solved.

After a year of digging and analyzing centuries-old bones, the researchers said Wednesday they have identified a set of bones they believe to be Caravaggio's, though they admit they can never be 100 percent certain.

They think Caravaggio may have died from sunstroke while weakened

by syphilis and other ailments.

The bones — a fragment of the frontal part of the skull, two jaw pieces, a femur and a fragment of the sacrum, or the [bone](#) at the base of the spine — were displayed on Wednesday in Ravenna, a northern Italian city where most of the analyses have been carried out. Kept inside a rectangular case, they rested on a silk red cushion.

Caravaggio, died in Porto Ercole, a beach town on the Tuscan coast, in 1610. At 39, the Baroque master had been a celebrity painter, whose notes works included "Bacchus" and "David with the Head of Goliath." He is known for his dramatic use of light, novel perspective and the use of ordinary people — sometimes street thugs — in religious and mythological scenes.

He had also led a dissolute life of street brawls, booze and encounters with prostitutes. His last days are shrouded in mystery.

The team of scientists dug up bones found in Porto Ercole's crypts and brought them to Ravenna to conduct lab tests, while historians combed through archives in search of papers documenting Caravaggio's movements. The group conducted carbon dating, DNA tests and other analyses on the bones, until they singled out one set of fragments — "Find No. 5."

"There can't be the scientific certainty because when one works on [ancient DNA](#), it is degraded," Giorgio Gruppioni, an anthropologist on the team, told The Associated Press. "But only in one set of bones did we find all the elements necessary for it to be Caravaggio's — age, period in which he died, gender, height."

The group says there is an 85 percent probability they are right, though team leader Silvano Vinceti says that is conservative. "We are being

cautious," he said. "As a historian I can say we have found the remains... All evidence concurs."

The DNA comparison was conducted between the bones that had been identified and that of some possible male relatives in Caravaggio, a small town in northern Italy where the painter — whose real name was Michelangelo Merisi — was born in 1571. Caravaggio had no known children, therefore no direct descendants.

Gruppioni, who is based in Ravenna, said the researchers identified a genetic combination in those whose last name was Merisi or Merisio, compatible with traces found on the bones in question. Because the bones are old and the DNA degraded, not all genetic characteristics could be confirmed.

Still, the evidence pointed to "Find No. 5." The bones belonged to a man who died between 38 and 40 years of age and at a time around 1610. They also presented a high level of lead and other metals associated with painting. Sediment found on the bones was also compatible with the deeper, older layers of terrain inside the crypt — the level where such old bones were thrown, the researchers said.

The bones belonged to a robust man. Caravaggio, at 170 centimeters (5 feet 7 inches), was tall by the standards of his time.

The cause of Caravaggio's death has been the subject of much conjecture, some of it nourished by the adventurous existence that the artist led. Possibilities raised by scholars range from malaria to syphilis to murder at the hands of one of the many enemies Caravaggio made over the years.

The researchers believe that Caravaggio may have died from sunstroke, saying that 1610 was recorded as an extremely hot year. Caravaggio,

who had just arrived by boat carrying his latest works, is believed to have collapsed on the beach. However, Gruppioni said sunstroke leaves no trace on the bones, therefore there is no scientific certainty.

According to the researchers, Caravaggio was buried in the town's San Sebastiano cemetery, and then his bones were dug up when the graveyard was moved.

The San Sebastiano death registry shows no record of Caravaggio dying. But Vinceti says that Spanish authorities who were in charge of the area at the time deliberately chose to bury him secretly so that they could take possession of his paintings undisturbed.

The project wrapped up just as Italy marks the 400 anniversary since Caravaggio's death, remembering him as a revolutionary artist who changed the history of modern painting.

A recent exhibit in Rome marking his death's anniversary and gathering some of his best-known works — such as "Bacchus," "The Cardsharps" and the two versions of "Supper at Emmaus" — drew over half a million visitors.

The bones will be briefly transferred to the town of [Caravaggio](#) and then go on display for a few weeks in Porto Ercole.

"It's only right that on the 400th anniversary of his death he is returned to the place where he died," said Vinceti.

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