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In the Footsteps of Copernicus. The Search for the Grave and Reburial of the Great Astronomer

Abstract

The article presents the issues surrounding the memorization at the Frombork Cathedral of the remarkable scholar, Nicolaus Copernicus, buried anonymously in 1543. The age-long search for the astronomer's final resting place had not previously been fruitful. In 2005, a team of researchers, led by Professor Jerzy Gąssowski, found fragments of a skeleton in the immediate vicinity of the altar of the Holy Cross – a place which had previously been in Copernicus's care. Anthropological research on the found skull allowed for the reconstruction of the Copernicus's face, which were compared to the preserved images of the astronomer. A portion of the scientific community did not agree with the apparent results of the studies. Their authenticity was then demonstrated by comparing DNA of the remains with that of material extracted from hair found in the astronomer's volume of *Calendarium Romanum*, found at Uppsala, Sweden. Five years after the publication of the results, the reburial ceremony of Copernicus took place, and was preceded by a pilgrimage across the places associated with the canon's life and work. Copernicus's final resting place at the Frombork Cathedral has been commemorated with a monumental tombstone.

On May 22, 2010, a solemn reburial of Nicolaus Copernicus took place in the Archcathedral Basilica in Frombork. Why did it take 467 years to organize the burial (or the "reburial", as it was described in the media)?

The history of interments of canons in the cathedral in Frombork goes back several centuries. Canons installed in the Warmia Chapter were given custody of one of the 16 side-altars located near the church's pillars, in the space between its naves, where they were inhumed after death. This is why a canon's altar also indicated his final resting place.¹ Over the centuries, hundreds of people were buried in the cathedral. Coffins were placed in earthen graves, then covered with a brick floor, and, in later centuries, with stone slabs; some were commemorated with a tombstone shortly after the funeral. Not all graves were marked. Sometimes new ones were dug into existing burials, which, as a result, were damaged to varying degrees and the bones therein were mixed up.² Of all the slabs and epitaphs on display, 128 have survived to this day.³ Some of them were moved to other locations and do not always cover burial sites, but only serve to commemorate those who were interred here.

¹ Borawska T., *Nicolaus Copernicus and His World. Environment. Friends. Echoes of a great discovery* (reprint), Toruń 2014, p. 413.

² Morysiński T., Zajdel D., *Nicolaus Copernicus – The History of the Search for His Grave in Frombork*, <https://madeinwm.pl/mikolaj-kopernik-historia-poszukiwan-jego-grobu/> [accessed on October 20, 2025].

³ *Catalogue of Art Monuments: Braniewo, Frombork, Orneta and Surroundings*. Edited by Arsyński M., Kutzner M., 1981, p. 71.

Where, then, among hundreds of canons, was Nicolaus Copernicus buried? Today, almost five centuries later, it has not been possible to determine the exact location of his final resting place. The area around the altar of Saint Bartholomew, the altar of the Holy Cross (formerly of Wenceslaus), or the space near the altar of the Blessed Sacrament in the nave have been suggested.⁴ This is because, after Copernicus's death, no slab was placed on his grave and no epitaph was made. It was only after Bishop Marcin Kromer took over the diocese and arrived in Frombork that, in accordance with his will, the first commemorative plaque was made and placed on the inside of the south wall of the cathedral.

This happened in 1581, 38 years after the scholar's death, when no one remembered where he was buried.⁵ The plaque was located in the immediate vicinity of the altar of Saint Bartholomew, perhaps because there was no free space elsewhere. After nearly 150 years, during the construction of the Chapel of the Saviour in 1735 (also known as the Szembek Chapel, after its founder), Copernicus's plaque was removed and in 1746 a monumental epitaph to Bishop Krzysztof Andrzej Szembek was erected in its place. Copernicus's plaque was moved to the chapel's sacristy, but over time, all traces of it were lost.

Was this first epitaph really placed near the astronomer's burial site? In 1618, during a trip to Frombork, Jan Brożek, professor at the Kraków

Academy, saw it still hanging in the place where the entrance to the Szembek chapel is located today, and took a transcription of the text from the plaque to Krakow. Thanks to this, we now know its content. Its most important detail is the date of the astronomer's death – "Obiit Anno. M. D. XLIII. Die XXIII. Maii." ("he died in the year 1543, on the 24th of May").⁶ Shortly after the disappearance of this plaque in 1735, the chapter wanted to honour the scholar and commissioned a new epitaph, which was placed in a more prominent location – on the second (from the perspective of the Altar of the Blessed Sacrament) northern pillar. In 1760, a portrait of Copernicus painted on a metal plate and surrounded by a laurel wreath was added above the epitaph. It was created by the painter Andrzej Knoppe (Konopke) of Königsberg.⁷ This location contributed to the confusion surrounding the search for Copernicus's grave. In 1802, representatives of the Warsaw Society of Friends of Science – Tadeusz Czacki and Marcin Molski – arrived in Frombork. Informed by the tradition of burying canons at the altars they looked after, the representatives lifted the slab under this epitaph, but, shortly and with shame, put it back in place.⁸ Under the slab, they discovered the remains of Henry Fleming, one of the chapel's first bishops, who was buried there in the year 1300. At that time, the cathedral was much smaller, built out of wood, and the presbytery and main altar – where the first bishops were buried – were located in the place of the current altar

⁴ Kokowski M., Michał *The Search for Copernicus' Grave: Reflections of the Devil's Advocate*, "Quarterly Journal of History Science and Technology" 52/1, 2007, p. 122.

⁵ Jezierski J., *Searching for the Grave, Identification of Remains, and Reburial of Nicolaus Copernicus*, "Nurt SVD" 45/1 (129), 2011, p. 229.

⁶ Borawska T., *Nicolaus Copernicus and His World...* (op. cit) 2014, p. 421 "The full text of the epitaph, including the date of death, has long been known from the book *Setnik pisarzy polskich* (A Hundred Polish Writers) printed in 1627 by Szymon Starowolski": Epitaph of Nicolaus Copernicus in Frombork on a marble plaque:

"D.O.M. To Nicolaus Copernicus of Toruń, doctor of arts and medicine, distinguished canon of Warmia, eminent astrologer, the venerable Marcin Kromer, Bishop of Warmia, in honor and memory for posterity in the year of our Lord 1581, died in 1543 on May 23."

A reproduction of the epitaph can be found, among others, in: W. Tatarkiewicz, *Nicolaus Copernicus and the Symmetry of the World*, "Rocznik Krakowski", 43: 1972, p. 17.

⁷ Kączkowska A., The Epitaph of Nicolaus Copernicus in Frombork, "Ochrona Zabytków" 6/1 (20), 1953, p. 55:

NICOLAO COPERNICO THORVNENSI CATHEDRALIS HVIVS ECCLAE VARMENSIS OLIM CANONICO ASTRONOMO CELEBERRIMO CVIVS NOMEN ET GLORIA VTRVMQVE REPLEVIT ORBEM MONVMENTUM HOC IN FRATERNI AMORIS AESTIMATIONISQVE TESSERAM PRAELATI, CANONICI, TOTVMQVE VARMIENSE CAPITVLVM POSVERE.

Currently, under the epitaph, there is also a bronze palm branch from the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which was added in 1946.

⁸ Jezierski J., *Searching for the Grave...*, op. cit. p. 230: "Leopold Prowe (19th century) established that the Chapter had a custom of burying canons at the altar where they performed divine service."

of the Blessed Sacrament.⁹ Another attempt to find the astronomer's grave was made in 1807, on the order of Napoleon. His officers, under the command of Gerard Gley, conducted a search, though it was unsuccessful.¹⁰ Several decades later, in 1781, the Bishop of Warmia, Filip Kremetz, wanted to commemorate the great astronomer by proposing the construction of a tomb in the cathedral, but this also did not come to fruition.¹¹ In 1909, a system of pipes for central heating radiators was installed under the floor of the cathedral.¹² During construction near Szembek's chapel, a large number of coffins were discovered, stacked one on top of the other. These were not exploratory excavations, however, but technical works without archaeological supervision. It was not until early January 1939, at the University of Königsberg, as part of the celebrations of Immanuel Kant and Nicolaus Copernicus Week, that the Germans attempted to locate the astronomer's grave with the intention of erecting a monument. The research was conducted near the altar of Saint Bartholomew. The location was chosen on the basis of the records of German historians, who, based on the existence of the first epitaph in said place, indicated the surroundings of the altar of Saint Bartholomew. A group of scientists led by the Prussian provincial conservator, Conrad Steibrecht, participated in the research. A report reads:

"A coffin with well-preserved remains of an unidentified canon was found there. Research work was also undertaken near the Szembek chapel, in the place where a heating duct, built in 1909, ran. Several coffins placed one on top of the other were also found there. Some of them were excavated (after being thoroughly photographed and even X-rayed) and

transported to Königsberg in order to conduct thorough research."

Unfortunately, the war thwarted the research plans and the results of the work were never announced.¹³

In 1941, Warmian historian Hans Schmauch came to the conclusion that Copernicus ought to be buried at the fourth altar (of the Holy Cross, formerly of Saint Wenceslas) in the right row, and not at the seventh, as was previously thought. However, Schmauch was not consistent, as he agreed with the thesis that Copernicus was, for an unknown reason, buried not at his altar (that is, the fourth altar) but at the seventh. This solution was suggested to him by Eugen Brachvogel. In 1973, Dr. Jerzy Sikorski from Olsztyn, a historian and employee of the state conservation services, came to the conclusion that Nicolaus Copernicus, as a canon, would have stood by his original altar (the fourth one) and should be buried there.

For years, when tourists visiting the cathedral after World War II asked about the resting place of the great astronomer, they found only an epitaph located at the altar of the Blessed Sacrament. Historical accounts continued to support the thesis that Copernicus's grave was located at the seventh southern side-altar, where Bishop Kromer's first epitaph from 1581 was located. Another indication of this altar was the funding of a bust of Copernicus, which was placed at the altar of Saint Bartholomew on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the scholar's birth.

Dr. Jerzy Sikorski, a historian from Olsztyn, had a different opinion, proving that the altar of Saint Wenceslaus (now the altar of the Holy Cross) belonged to Copernicus, by using lists of patronage of successive altars – documents

⁹ Jezierski J., *The Dispute over the Grave and Second Burial of Nicolaus Copernicus*, Dr. T. Węclawowicz from the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, bishops were buried in the Middle Ages.

¹⁰ Toruń tourism service, *Where is Nicolaus Copernicus Really Buried?*, <https://www.turystyka.torun.pl/art/534/gdzie-naprawde-jest-pochowany-mikolaj-kopernik.html>, [accessed on October 21, 2025].

¹¹ Kopiczko A., *A Contribution to the History of the Celebrations of the 400th Anniversary of Nicolaus Copernicus' Death in East Prussia*, "Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie", Olsztyn 2011 No. 4 (274), p. 625.

¹² Semków J., Wojnowska W., *Stoves and tiles from the collection of the Nicolaus Copernicus Museum in Frombork*, 2024, p. 30.

¹³ Kopiczko A., *A Contribution to the History of Celebrations...*, op. cit. pp. 628-629.

which, in turn, contained lists of canons.¹⁴ The one that belonged to Copernicus was on list no. 14, which contained the names of the canons who took care of this altar. Copernicus's predecessors were Jan Rex (who died in 1447) and Jan Zanau (who died in 1495).¹⁵ After Copernicus's death in 1543, the altar was taken over by Jan Loitsch and Piotr Kostka, who left the chapter and departed Frombork. The next burial at this altar may have taken place in 1608 and ought be that of Marcin Kołacki, but his tombstone is located elsewhere – on the north side, at the third altar of Our Lady of Sorrows. Only the slab of the next canon on this list, Andrzej Zagórny, who died in 1634, has survived.

All this piqued the interest of Bishop Jacek Jezierski. After Dr. Jerzy Sikorski's publication of an article entitled *Where is Copernicus's grave?* – in which the author put forward a thesis about Copernicus's place of interment, pointing to the former altar of Wenceslaus (now the Holy Cross) – Bishop Dr. Jacek Jezierski accepted this hypothesis as fact. In April 2004, during a meeting of the Scientific Council of the Higher School of Humanities in Pułtusk (which has had its Research Center in Frombork since July 2001), the bishop proposed that the search for Copernicus's grave be undertaken by the eminent archaeologist and mediaevalist, Professor Jerzy Gąssowski.¹⁶ The professor recalls the beginning of the research work as follows:

When Bishop Jacek Jezierski asked me to take on this task, I did not see myself in this role. First of all, I was not a specialist on Copernicus, and attempts to find his burial place had been unsuccessful for over two hundred years. New light was shed on the matter by the research of Dr. Jerzy Sikorski from Olsztyn, who is an expert on Copernicus. Sikorski, knowing the custom of burying canons under the altars they cared for during their lifetime, was able to indicate the place where we should begin our search.¹⁷

Before the start of the first research season in 2004, geophysical surveys of the interior of the cathedral were conducted. These measurements were carried out by a team from the Geophysical Research Company in Warsaw, led by Mirosław Musiatowicz.¹⁸ This allowed for the creation of a map of all the graves located beneath the chapel floor. Next, three-dimensional measurements of the interior were taken using a laser scanner, led by Karol Czajkowski from the National Center for Research and Documentation of Monuments at the Ministry of Culture. During the first year of research (16–31 August, 2004), the graves located on the southern side of the altar of the Holy Cross were examined, from east to west. The work carried out by archaeologists from the Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology of the University of Humanities in Pułtusk was supervised by Prof. Jerzy Gąssowski. Many more graves were discovered than initially expected; some skeletons were mixed up, and after anthropological evaluation, they did not indicate the remains of individuals aged around 70. One of

¹⁴ Kokowski M., *The Search for Copernicus' Grave – Reflections Advocati Diaboli*, 2005, p. 122: "The fundamental assumption regarding the location of Nicolaus Copernicus' grave is based on the considerations of Prowy [1866] (reprinted [1870]), Schmauch [1938], [1941], Brachvogel [1939], and finally Sikorski [1973a] pp. 270-275 (2nd ed. [1985] pp. 310-317; 3rd ed. [1999]) and [1973b]".

¹⁵ *Catalogue of Art Monuments: Braniewo, Frombork, Orneta...*, op. cit., pp. 71-75. The tombstone of Jan Rex, who died in 1447, marked in the catalogue of monuments with the number 30, is located in front of the 7th altar of Saint Martin on the north side. The tombstone of Jan Zanau, who died in 1495, marked with the number 41, is located on the west side under the organ prospect, and the slab of Marcin Kołacki, who died in 1608, marked with number 28 in the catalog, is located in front of the altar of Our Lady of Sorrows, on the north side. Only the slab of Andrzej Zagórny, who died in 1634, is located in front of the altar of the Holy Cross.

¹⁶ The research was made possible thanks to grants obtained by the Academy of Humanities in Pułtusk, primarily from the Leopold Kronenberg Foundation at Citi Handlowy.

¹⁷ PAP – Science in Poland, *Scientists: The Mystery of Copernicus' Grave – Explained*, <https://naukawpolsce.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C331442%2Cnaukowcy-tajemnica-grobu-kopernika-wyjasniona.html>, [accessed on October 20, 2025].

¹⁸ G. Pacanowski, M. Musiatewicz, *The Use of the Georadar Method in Archaeological Prospecting on the Example of Research in the Cathedral in Frombork*, [in:] J. Gąssowski (ed.), *Searching...*, op. cit., pp. 41-54.

several surprises was the discovery of the coffin of a girl several years old, as was the uncovering of the coffin of Andrzej Gąsiorowski. On the latter was a tin plate with the details of the canon, who died in 1767.¹⁹ It is puzzling why the canon was not placed in the crypt, which had been accessible since 1720. Perhaps the chapter deviated from this custom at the express request of the canon, who wished to remain at his altar, but according to list no. 14, his name is not associated with that specific location. During the second research season (8–27 August, 2005), further graves were examined and a total of 13 were discovered. The location in which they were discovered was small, and, in several cases, excavations carried out in later years damaged earlier burials in the same place. The work was carried out by Beata Jurkiewicz, Jakub Affelski, and Grzegorz Mutzolf.²⁰ When the research was nearing its end, on 24 August, 2005, in the side aisle – between the pillar supporting the pulpit and the pillar on which the altar of the Holy Cross was built, in the burial marked with the number 13, which was the most damaged and dug up by other graves – a skull and other, scattered bones were found, which could have belonged to a man who died at the age of about 60–70.²¹

The find was sent for anthropological examination, which was carried out by Prof. Karol Piasecki from University of Szczecin and University of Warsaw, an eminent anthropologist and specialist in the reconstruction of human remains. He used a morphological method and determined that the excavated remains belonged to a man aged 70–90 by examining the cranial sutures and the condition of the teeth. The skull also had certain notable features: a small depression on the right orbital ridge of the skull

and traces of damage to the nose in youth, which caused asymmetry of the nasal cavities.²² Already in November 2005, a press conference was convened at the Baltic Research Centre on Cathedral Hill in Frombork. After the speakers presented their archaeological research, the conference was summarized as follows:

*In agreement with Prof. Karol Piasecki, after considering all the circumstances, we express our conviction that the skull under examination is, with a high degree of probability, the skull of Nicolaus Copernicus.*²³

The skull was transferred to the Central Forensic Laboratory of the Police Headquarters in Warsaw, and the examination was conducted by Deputy Inspector Dariusz Zajdel. He reconstructed Copernicus's face using a method formerly known as the Gerasimov method, as well as with the aid of computers.²⁴ The researcher took into account the scar on the skull – above the right eye socket – and the defect in the nose. The lower part of the face was reconstructed without taking into account the lower jawbone, as archaeologists did not find it in the excavation. In consultation with Prof. Karol Piasecki, Dariusz Zajdel expressed his conviction that the skull under examination was that of Nicolaus Copernicus. He estimated the degree of certainty at 97 percent. If a definitive identification could be made using DNA, this certainty would increase to 100 percent.²⁵

Some members of the scientific community raised serious objections to the entire process of searching for the grave and then examining Copernicus's skull. Doubts were raised by, among others, Professor Bogusław Młodziejowski, head of the Department of

¹⁹ Kokowski M., *Poszukiwanie grobu...*, op. cit. p. 137. The coffin of Canon Gąsiorowski should be located at the altar of Saint Anne, which the canon looked after.

²⁰ Morysiński T., Zajdel D., *Nicolaus Copernicus...*, op. cit., [accessed on October 21, 2025].

²¹ Gąsowski J., Jurkiewicz B., *The Search for Nicolaus Copernicus's Tomb*, in: *The Search for Nicolaus Copernicus's Tomb*, 2006, p. 12 The drawing shows the location of excavation no. 13, considered to be Copernicus's grave.

²² Jezierski J., *The Search for the Grave...*, op. cit. p. 231.

²³ Gąsowski J., *How Copernicus' grave was discovered*, Rzeczpospolita, <https://historia.rp.pl/historia/art9503211-jak-odkryto-grob-mikolaja-kopernika>, [accessed on October 20, 2025].

²⁴ Jezierski J., *Poszukiwanie grobu...*, op. cit. p. 231.

²⁵ Morysiński T., Zajdel D., *Nicolaus Copernicus...*, op. cit., [accessed on November 18, 2025].

Forensic Science and Medicine at the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, who accused Deputy Inspector Zajdel's work of "excessive artistic interference", as well as Dr. (now Professor) Tomasz Kozłowski from the Department of Anthropology at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, who questioned, among other things, the dating of the skull, claiming that "the human skeleton does not have a single feature that would allow the age of a person at the time of death to be determined with an accuracy of one year".²⁶ According to Prof. Kozłowski, carbon-14 dating of the bones could help confirm the dating of the remains found. This method allows the age of the bones to be determined quite accurately. However, the research team led by Professor Gąssowski did not agree to radiocarbon dating of the skull.²⁷

Professor Gąssowski's team decided to prove the authenticity of the excavated remains based on DNA testing among Copernicus's relatives. Researchers from the Museum and Institute of Zoology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw (Wiesław Bogdanowicz and Dr. Marta Gajewska) and from the Laboratory Forensic geneticists from the Institute of Forensic Research in Krakow (Dr. Wojciech Branicki and Dr. Tomasz Kupiec) determined the mitochondrial DNA code.²⁸ The initial search focused on finding the grave of Bishop Łukasz Watzenrode, Nicolaus Copernicus' uncle, who was buried in the presbytery of the cathedral in Frombork in 1512. According to Dr. Jerzy Sikorski:

*Finding the remains of Copernicus's uncle, extracting DNA from them and comparing it with genetic material taken from the remains found in Frombork in 2005 would give 100% certainty that they belong to Copernicus.*²⁹

In 2006, Prof. Tomasz Węclawowicz from Krakow began exploratory research. Unfortunately, however, it was not possible to excavate the site where the main altar of Frombork Cathedral is currently located. This was because, at the time when Bishop Łukasz Watzenrode was buried there, the former altar from 1504 – much narrower than the current one – stood in said place.

From the construction of the brick presbytery in 1342 until the foundation of the new Baroque altar in 1752, eight bishops were buried in the presbytery, likely as close as possible to the polyptych, where free space was abundant. The bishop who commissioned the Gothic altar was, in turn, probably buried as close as possible to the sanctuary. This is why the tomb of Watzenrode and other bishops could be covered by the newly created monumental altar – with stairs leading to the altar and a pedestal preceding the stairs. The Gothic altar was 3.30 metres wide and 1.28 metres deep, while the Baroque altar was, in turn, 12.4 metres wide and 4.76 metres deep. If there were earlier graves or a crypt in said space, they were probably destroyed and filled in so as to strengthen the floor before erecting the monumental stone structure. During the search, fragments of stone tracery from stained glass windows were found under the stairs leading to the altar, which had been placed under the floor to reinforce the ground, which had been weakened by the interments. Since it was not possible to reach the bishops' burials from the floor of the presbytery, another attempt was made through the canonical crypt. The crypt is located in the central part of the cathedral's presbytery, and is closed with a brass-framed stone slab. It was here, during the burials of canons, that the slab was lifted and the coffin lowered into the crypt, and then placed in the appropriate place through the entrance in the

²⁶ Opoka, *The Mystery of Copernicus' Skull*, <https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/I/IH/pk200936-frombork>, [accessed on October 19, 2025].

²⁷ Kozłowski T., *Stop Copernicus! Ad Vocem*, "Archeologia" 2009 No. 6(46), pp. 38-42

²⁸ Borawska T., *Nicolaus Copernicus...*, op. cit. p. 410.

²⁹ Libudzka A., *Dr. Sikorski: The Search for Copernicus' Relatives is Necessary*, *Dzieje.pl*, <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/dr-sikorski-potrzebne-sa-poszukiwania-krewnych-kopernika>, [accessed on November 19, 2025].

wall on the south side of the presbytery. The external entrance to the crypt was bricked up after the war, and it was first necessary to break down the wall in order to enter the interior.³⁰ Once inside, attempts were made to drill through the wall of the canonical crypt, as it was believed that the bishops were buried in an adjacent crypt built especially for them. Unfortunately, this attempt to find the crypt, and thus the coffins buried there, was yet again unsuccessful.

To finally prove the authenticity of the excavated remains, J. Gąssowski's team continued to search for traces of DNA. First, research was conducted among documents concerning Copernicus's female descendants. The researchers (Prof. Krzysztof Mikulski and his collaborators Joanna Jędrzejewska and Anna Stachowska, who conducted research on Copernicus's mitochondrial genealogy) managed to review the records of Gdańsk parishes from the 16th to the 18th century, which regarded relatives of Nicolaus's sister. Thirteen generations of women were investigated using the prospective method, but the research came to a standstill without any results.

It was also decided to search through the documents and books that belonged to Copernicus.³¹ Since his library collection was taken across the Baltic Sea during the Swedish invasion of 1626, it was necessary to collaborate with researchers from the University of Uppsala. Of particular interest was a letter from Copernicus to Bernard Wapowski. This was because the letter was partly stained with blood. A sample had to be taken from the stain to check whether it still contained DNA. However, complications arose as the management of the library in Uppsala did not agree to take a sample from the letter and cut out part of the text.³² Thus, further work was halted. The search was then directed towards examining other books that belonged to Copernicus in the past. (The library stores 22 volumes.) Prof. Goeran Henriksson, together with

with Marie Allen from the University of Uppsala and Polish researcher Prof. Władysław Duczko from the Academy of Humanities, took the greatest interest in *Calendarium Romanum Magnum* by Johannes Stöffler (d. 1531), which Copernicus used very often, and which were found to contain 9 strands of hair – two of which were suitable for genetic testing. Despite the passage of almost 500 years, it was possible to extract undamaged DNA from the hair roots. Its analysis, carried out by Marie Allen in the spring of 2008, showed that the DNA from the two hairs found in Stöffler's calendar matches the DNA from a tooth found in the skull discovered in Frombork Cathedral. The authenticity of the skeletal remains was triumphantly announced, and it was concluded that the skull excavated in Frombork Cathedral belonged to our great astronomer.

After the research was completed and the results announced, in 2010, a scholarly session was held at the headquarters of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (also known as the Polish Academy of Learning) in Krakow. It was attended by opponents of the search and of the identification of the remains excavated in 2005 in Frombork Cathedral. The session was organized by Prof. Michał Kokowski from the Institute of the History of Science of the Polish Academy of Sciences, who criticized the research by stating that "the researchers made very serious mistakes concerning both knowledge of Copernican studies as well as interpretation of DNA analysis results". Meanwhile, Dr. Tomasz Grzybowski, professor at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, member of the Department of Forensic Medicine at the Collegium Medicum in Bydgoszcz, confirmed the veracity of the research. Ultimately, the genetic verification was not questioned, and the opinion of O. Gingerich, who did not deny the findings of Prof. J. Gąssowski and his colleagues – specialists in

³⁰ To ensure safety, the archaeological teams complied with all safety requirements due to the possibility of fungi and microbes dangerous to human life and health remaining in the crypt.

³¹ Jezierski J., *The Dispute over the Grave and Second Burial of Nicolaus Copernicus*. The research was made possible thanks to grants obtained by the Academy of Humanities in Pultusk, primarily from the Leopold Kronenberg Banking Foundation at Citi Handlowy.

³² Borawska T., *Nicolaus Copernicus...*, op. cit. p. 431.

other scientific disciplines – was significant as well.³³

Bishop Jacek Jezierski, who was one of the enthusiasts searching for Copernicus's grave, emphasized that it was time to give a dignified burial to one of the greatest Poles, who was a canon of the Warmia chapter. It was here, in the cathedral, that the canon prayed and worked, and it was in Frombork that he created his greatest work. The solemn burial was to be a grand event for Frombork and Warmia. The remains, excavated in 2005 near the altar of the Holy Cross, were to be reburied in 2010. In preparation for the ceremony, and thus for the commemoration of Copernicus, at the end of March 2009, the curia announced a competition for the design of the tombstone. Six entries were submitted to the competition. The competition committee selected the design by a Polish-Belgian Architecture Studio from Warsaw. The authors of the design were Adam Wagner and Dariusz Bodzioch. The tombstone was made of black granite, reminiscent of outer space, and the Sun and planets made of brass were placed on its spherical surface. The whole structure is 3.8 meters tall and 80 cm wide, and is integrated into the pillar at the altar which Copernicus took care of. In preparation for the reburial ceremony of Copernicus, a small zinc coffin was made to hold the preserved remains, which was placed in a sandalwood sarcophagus designed by Andrzej Ryczek. On one of the walls of the lid, the coffin bore a portrait of the astronomer – modelled on his so-called gymnasium portrait. Copernicus's funeral ceremonies began on February 19, the 537th anniversary of the great scholar's birth in Toruń. On that day (Tuba Dei), the largest bell located on the tower of the Toruń Cathedral rang to mark the public display of Copernicus's remains. The farewell ceremonies took place at the Church of Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist, in the so-called Copernican chapel, where, according to tradition, Copernicus was baptized. The sarcophagus was then transported to Olsztyn, and, on March 16,

2010, the procession's first station took place – in Saint James's Cathedral in Olsztyn. The next, second station was located in the castle of the Warmia chapter, which now houses the Museum of Warmia and Mazury. The coffin was placed on a catafalque in the so called Copernican rooms, and, for two months, residents and tourists could pay tribute to the astronomer. The coffin was then taken on a pilgrimage through the towns of Warmia with which Copernicus was associated: starting from Olsztyn, through Dobrze Miasto, Lidzbark Warmiński, Orneta, Pieniężno, and Braniewo, to Frombork. On May 21st, five years after the discovery of Copernicus's grave and two years after the final identification of the remains, Copernicus returned to Frombork. The sarcophagus containing the remains was laid to rest in the Frombork Cathedral, and the parishioners prepared a poetry and music program ending with Juliusz Słowacki's Hymn. Night has already fallen when the people surrounded the coffin and said a prayer. The next day, on May 22nd, 2010, began the celebrations, and church dignitaries, priests, and bishops from all over Poland arrived in Frombork. The entire ceremony was presided over by Archbishop Józef Kowalczyk, then Apostolic Nuncio and Primate of Poland.³⁴ Many invited delegations from the world of science and culture, as well as local government authorities, also arrived. Present were rectors of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, and the Academy of Humanities in Pułtusk, as well as the prorector of the Immanuel Kant University in Kaliningrad, and Prof. Owen J. Gingerich from Harvard University, the most eminent expert on Copernicus. The nave was filled to capacity, and the side aisles were lined with the colour guards of schools named after Nicolaus Copernicus. Many TV stations received accreditation to broadcast and record the event. Representatives of several foreign television stations were also present. After the final

³³ Borawska, T., *Nicolaus Copernicus...*, op. cit., p. 450.

³⁴ Jezierski, J., *Searching for the grave...*, op. cit. p. 235.

farewell prayer, the astronomer's remains were carried in a solemn procession through the nave of the cathedral to their burial place, where they were laid to rest in the place where they were found, i.e., in the immediate vicinity of the altar of the Holy Cross which Copernicus cared for during his lifetime.³⁵

During Copernicus's funeral, the Toruń Symphony Orchestra, the Astrolabe Choir (Chór Astrolabium), and soloists from the Grand Theatre performed *Requiem* by Mozart as well as *Cosmopolis*. The performance of the commemorative piece, commissioned by the authorities of Toruń, was conducted by composer Krzesimir Dębski.

Was the monument erected exactly at the astronomer's final resting place? The dispute among scientists – questioning the identification of Copernicus's remains found in 2005 and the place of burial in 1543 – should be considered an unresolved issue. The important fact is that Copernicus – who was buried in Frombork Cathedral – has been commemorated, and today it is possible to approach the tombstone erected in 2010 – located next to the altar of the Holy Cross – and pay tribute to the great scholar.

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³⁵ Cathedral of the Archdiocese of Warmia, *Second Funeral of Canon Nicolaus Copernicus*, <http://katedra-frombork.pl/kopernik.html>, [accessed on November 18, 2025].

List of illustrations for the article In the footsteps of Copernicus. The search for the tomb and reburial of the Great Astronomer.



Fig. 1 Epitaph of Nicolaus Copernicus in Frombork erected by Bishop Marcin Kromer in 1581, the text of which was transcribed by Jan Brożek in 1618. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolaus_Copernicus_epitaph_Frauenburg.jpg



Fig. 2. Frombork Cathedral. Entrance gate to the Szembek Chapel from 1735, in the place where the first epitaph of Nicolaus Copernicus was hung. Photo: Archives of the Nicolaus Copernicus Museum in Frombork

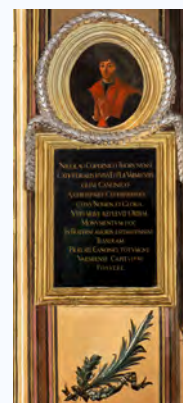


Fig. 3. Nicolaus Copernicus's epitaph from 1735 on the second northern pillar of the cathedral in Frombork, funded by the Warmia Chapter with a portrait added in 1760. Photo: Archives of the Nicolaus Copernicus Museum in Frombork



Fig. 4. Olsztyn historian Dr. Jerzy Sikorski, who proved that the altar of Saint Wenceslaus (now the altar of the Holy Cross) belonged to Copernicus. Photo: Archives of the Nicolaus Copernicus Museum in Frombork

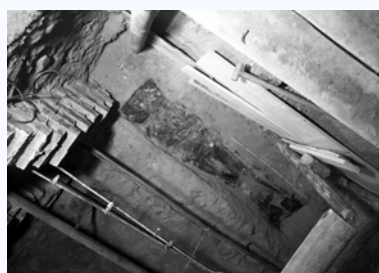


Fig. 5. Search for the Astronomer's grave in 1939 in Frombork Cathedral by researchers from the University of Königsberg. Photo: East Prussia – Photographic collections of the former Office of the Conservator of Monuments in Königsberg, ISzt PAN, Frombork, 055811



Fig. 6. The Archcathedral Basilica in Frombork, the Altar of the Holy Cross from around 1639, which stands in the place of the former altar of Saint Wenceslaus, which was cared for by Copernicus. Photo: Archives of the Nicolaus Copernicus Museum in Frombork



Fig. 7. Prof. Jerzy Gąssowski, archaeologist, Institute of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Humanities in Pultusk. Photo: Archives of the Nicolaus Copernicus Museum in Frombork



Fig. 8. Location of burials discovered during excavations in 2004–2005 in the archcathedral basilica in Frombork. Photo: Teresa Borawska, Nicolaus Copernicus and His World, Environment. Friends. Echoes of a Great Discovery, 2014, ill. 71, p. 429.

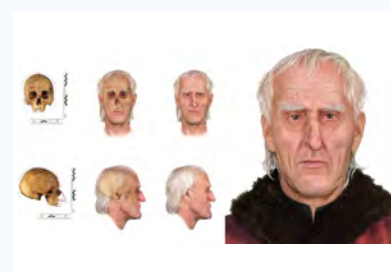


Fig. 9. Reconstruction of Copernicus's face. source: <https://clkp.policja.pl/clk/badania-i-projekty/ciekawe-badania/172502,Czy-tak-wygladal-Mikolaj-Kopernik.html>



Fig. 10. Archcathedral Basilica in Frombork, presbytery.
Photo: MMK archives in Frombork

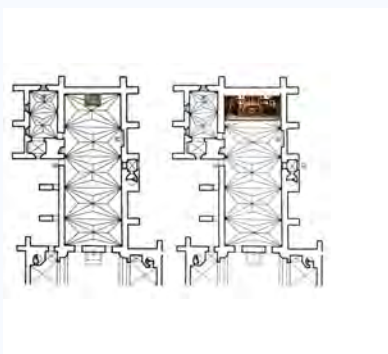


Fig. 11. Plan of the presbytery with the altar from 1504 and 1752 marked.
Photo: MMK archives in Frombork

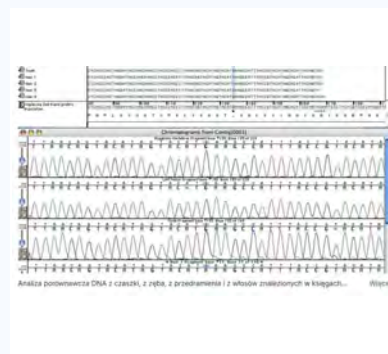


Fig. 12. Comparative DNA analysis of the skull, tooth, forearm, and hair found in Nicolaus Copernicus' books, photo: Kronenberg Foundation source: <https://tvn24.pl/polska/to-sa-szczatki-kopernika-ra77323-ls3719833>



Fig. 13. The remains of Nicolaus Copernicus found in Frombork in 2005. Source: Posłaniec Warmiński, Prayer over the coffin of Canon Nicolaus, 8/2, 2010 p. VI



Fig. 14. Farewell to Nicolaus Copernicus in the Toruń Cathedral, placing the urn in the Copernicus Chapel. May 19, 2010. Source: <https://www.rm24.pl/foto/zdjecie,ild,152273,iAld,9265>



Fig. 15. Farewell to Nicolaus Copernicus by the residents of Toruń's Old Town Square, May 19, 2010. Source: <https://www.rm24.pl/foto/zdjecie,ild,152273,iAld,9265>



Fig. 16. Farewell to Nicolaus Copernicus at the chapter castle in Olsztyn, now the Museum of Warmia and Mazury, Nicolaus Copernicus' remains returned to Olsztyn, May 20, 2010. Source: <https://www.rm24.pl/fakty/news-szczatki-mikolaja-kopernika-wrocily-do-olsztyna,nld,242137>



Fig. 17. Funeral mass at Saint James's Cathedral in Olsztyn, Copernicus reburied, May 20, 2010. Source: <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,7919419,kopernik-znow-pochowany.html>



Fig. 18. Frombork, return of Copernicus' remains after 467 years to the Archcathedral Basilica in Frombork, May 21, 2010. Photo: Photo archive of the MMK in Frombork



Fig. 19. 20. Solemn Mass in Frombork Cathedral, presided over by Archbishop Józef Kowalczyk, Apostolic Nuncio. May 22, 2010.
Photo: Photo archive of the Frombork Museum



Fig. 19. 20. Solemn Mass in Frombork Cathedral, presided over by Archbishop Józef Kowalczyk, Apostolic Nuncio. May 22, 2010.
Photo: Photo archive of the Frombork Museum



Fig. 21. Placing Copernicus' sarcophagus with his remains in the tomb at the altar of the Holy Cross in Frombork Cathedral.
Photo: Photo archive of the Frombork Museum



Fig. 22. After the funeral ceremony, a concert was performed by the Toruń Symphony Orchestra, the Astrolabe Choir (Chór Astrolabium), and soloists from the Grand Theatre, conducted by composer Krzesimir Dębski.
Photo: Photo archive of the MMK in Frombork



Fig. 23. The tomb of Nicolaus Copernicus in Frombork Cathedral, designed by architects Dariusz Jan Bodzioch and Adam Wagner.
Photo: Photo archive of the MMK in Frombork