

The bones of Descartes

Peter Corke

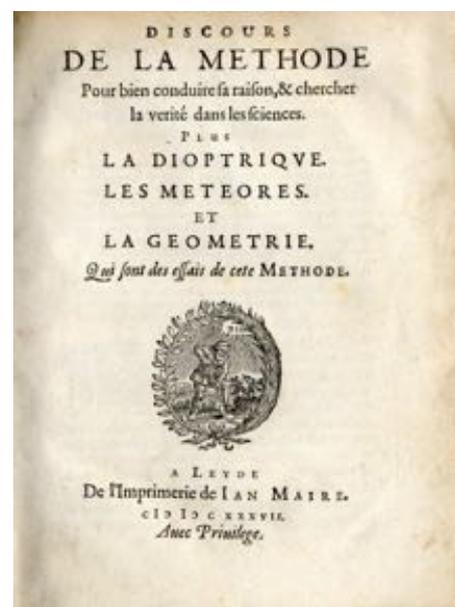
A chronology summarised from Descartes's bones by Russell Shorto.



Rene Descartes triggered a revolution in thinking, Cartesianism, and attracted many followers and he became a personage. His thinking was vigorously opposed by the Church. And Louis XIV in 1671 forbade the teaching of Cartesianism at the U of Paris.

Philosopher and scientist, born at La Haye France, 31 March, 1596; died at Stockholm, Sweden, 11 February 1650. He studied at the Jesuit college of La Fleche, one of the most famous schools of the time. In 1613 he went to Paris, where he formed a lasting friendship with Father Mersenne, O. F. M., and made the acquaintance of the mathematician Mydorge. He afterwards enlisted in the armies of Maurice of Nassau, and of the Duke of Bavaria.

On 10 November, 1619, he felt a strong impulse to set aside the prejudices of his childhood and of his environment, and to devote his life to the restoration of human knowledge, which was then in a state of decadence; and for him this mission took on quite a mystical character. He had a dream which he interpreted as a revelation, and he became convinced that "it was the Spirit of Truth that willed to open for him all the treasures of knowledge". After much journeying in Brittany, Poitou, Switzerland, and Italy, he returned to Paris in 1625. There he remained for two years during which it was his fortune to meet Cardinal Berulle who encouraged him in his scientific vocation. But as Paris offered neither the peace nor the independence his work demanded, he set out in 1629 for Holland, and there in the midst of a commercial people he enjoyed the advantage of living as quietly as in a desert. From this retreat he gave to the world his "Discours de la



methode" (1637), "Meditations" (1641), "Principes" (1644), and "Passions"(1649). "Le Monde" had been completed in 1633, but the condemnation of [Galileo](#) frightened Descartes who preferred to avoid any collisions with [ecclesiastical](#) authority. He deferred the publication of this clever work but maintained the hope of eventually bringing it out.

Queen Christina wanted to build on the achievements of her father and create a court that would rival France, with poets, artists and philosophers. She wanted new ideas, Science and Cartesianism and an academy of science.

Partly out of frustration and opposition to his philosophies he yielded to the entreaties of Christina and his friend and protege and French ambassador Chanut and arrived in Sweden in 1649.

However by the time the Queen had moved on to other things and he saw her as a dabbler and dilettante. She found him curmudgeonly rather than revolutionary.



Queen Christina of Sweden (left) and René Descartes (right).

Death and first burial



Over the course of the winter he was required to give Christina philosophy lessons beginning at 5am which was against his lifelong habits of working at night and sleeping late. Every morning he journeyed from Chanut's residence to the palace, during one of the coldest winters on record. He became sick and died of inflammation of the lungs on 2 February 1650.

As a Roman Catholic in a Protestant nation, he was buried in a corner of a graveyard reserved for aliens in Adolf Fredriks kyrka in Stockholm. In 1666 in accordance with the wishes of his friends his remains were to be *translated* to France with the royal authority of Louis XIV.

Inside the church a memorial to the memory of Descartes was installed by Gustav III.

Translation and second burial



Front of the Church of the Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève, in Paris, in a 19th-century engraving. The site is now occupied by the Lycée Henri-IV, built in part with elements of the abbey buildings and the original bell tower, Tour Clovis, remains. The abbey was founded in 502 by King Clovis I.

After 16 years in the cemetery in Stockholm the remains were disinterred and transferred to the the same building where Descartes had died. In the chapel of the French ambassador's residence a ceremony was held, presided over by the Catholic Church of Sweden, and the bones are transferred to a copper coffin 2.5 feet long. Hugues de Terlon, the French ambassador to Sweden, asks permission to take, as a personal relic, a bone of the right index finger as the "instrument of the defunct's immortal writings".

The coffin was kept at Terlon's residence, watched over by the Stockholm city guard, until it begins its journey to Paris. The captain of the Stockholm guard is Isaak Planström. The translation party left Stockholm

in June 1666 via ship to Copenhagen and then overland to France. At the town of Péronne the coffin was inspected by customs officers before it reached Paris in January 1667 and was placed in the church of St. Paul. In June 1667, with great pomp and ceremony, the coffin was taken to the church of St. Geneviève dedicated to the patron saint of Paris and situated at the city's highest point.

Revolution and third burial

The church was in poor repair and in 1744 Louis XV vowed to build a new church and construction started in 1757. It physically abutted the old abbey. Work proceeded slowly and it was completed in 1790, just in time for the revolution. The National Constituent Assembly ordered that the building be changed from a church to a mausoleum for the interment of great Frenchmen. The new building was taken over by state and because its classical style fitted the artistic ideals of the Revolution it was dechristianised and converted into the Pantheon.

On April 12 1791 the National Assembly considered the pantheonization of Descartes with case presented by Condorcet. The assembly agreed to send the petition of the Committee of the Constitution.

The revolution rejected symbols of the past and the government encouraged mobs to tear down the structures of the old regime and this led to wholesale ransacking of churches and palaces. However some within the revolutionary committees were concerned. Alexandre Lenoir a lover of art was the student of the painter Doyen who was on the committee. He suggested that he/somebody ought to rescue the works of art which would otherwise be destroyed. The idea was presented to the mayor of Paris and then the revolutionary government who appointed Lenoir the job of rescuing... He was given a salary, two assistants and a repository for rescued items: a former convent Petits-Augustins on the bank of the Seine, the *dépôt des monuments*, currently the site of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

While the Committee of the Constitution was considering the application for the pantheon-ization of Descartes the church of St. Geneviève was ransacked. Toward the end of 1792 Lenoir was called by the abbot to rescue its precious objects. He made a detailed diagram of the church and the coffins beneath its floor and logged all the items that he removed, but he failed to record the retrieval of Descartes's remains. However he later wrote that he took a small fragment of a bone plate from which he carved several rings that he gave to "friends of the good philosophy".

Lenoir later wrote that he found the remains of Descartes in a rotted wood coffin (he was buried in a copper coffin) and that at his depot he transferred these to an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus made of porphyry.

Lenoir's collection became the Museum of French Monuments and endured until 1816 when Louis XVIII decreed that all religious property would be returned to their original owners. It was proposed that many remains from the museum would be interred at the new Père-Lachaise cemetery, but Descartes's followers intervened and chose an alternative.

Delambre oversaw the removal of the wooden casket from the sarcophagus where it was opened. The interior cask had a lead plaque which had the name of Descartes, his date of birth and death. But those present were surprised to find very few recognisable bones, mostly just fragments and powder and no skull. These were placed in a fresh oak coffin which was carried up the hill to the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés accompanied by members of the French Academy of Sciences, placed in the vault and sealed. The vault can be found today between two other graves — those of the scholarly monks Jean Mabillon and Bernard de Montfaucon — in a chapel of the abbey.

The mystery of the skull

Some members of the party were perplexed by the lack of a skull, which as a large bone should have survived somewhat intact and not have been reduced to powder. One of those present did some investigation and reported a rumour that the skull had never left Sweden.

The Swedish chemist Berzelius spent some years in Paris as a guest of the academy and was in the city when the third burial took place, and was aware of the gossip surrounding the remains.



In March 1821 he read in a Stockholm newspaper an article about the estate of his former professor, Anders Sparman, from which the skull of the famous Cartesius was sold for 17 or 18 riksdaler. He contacted the auction house and found that the skull had been bought by an infamous casino owner called Arngren. Berzelius contacted Arngren and bought the skull for the price paid and it was delivered to Cuvier who decided it would be kept at the Museum of Comparative Anatomy, part of the Museum of Natural History.

The skull was missing the jawbone and it was covered in Latin writing which read:

*This small skull once belonged to the great Cartesius
The rest of his remains are hidden far away in the land of France
But all around the circle of the globe his genius is praised,
And his spirt still rejoices in the sphere of heaven.*

and in Swedish was written:

*The skull of Descartes, taken by J. Fr. Planström, the year 1666, at the time
when the body was being returned to France.*

Delambre took up the investigation of the provenance of the skull. He presented a report to the academy on May 14, 1821 which concluded that the skull was not Descartes. Cuvier disagreed and contacted Alexandre-Maurice Blanc de Lanautte, comte d'Hauterive who was a government archivist in the office of foreign affairs. Hauterive found a Swedish work from the mid-1700s citing a chain of ownership of the skull and said that the man who took the skull was Is. Planström. Planström died owing money to Olaf Bång, a brewer and merchant, who took some of Planström's property in lieu of payment and this included the skull. It was inherited by Bång's son Jonas whose friend Sven Hof wrote the commemorative verse which Bång enscribed on the skull.

Peter Liljewalch was a Swedish medical doctor who charted the owners of the skull as a retirement project in the 1860s and 1870s and his manuscripts are held by the Lund University Library. From Jonas Bång the skull went to Johan Axel Hägerflycht who held it until he died in 1740. It fell into the hands of a government official Anders Anton Stiernman whose name is enscribed on the skull along with the year 1751. On his death it went to his son-in-law Olof Celsius (whose cousin was the astronomer Anders Celsius after whom the temperature scale is named) who added his own signature to the skull. The next owner was Johan Fischerström and on his death in 1796 his property was auctioned and the skull was bought by a tax assessor named Ahlgren. Anders Sparrman was one of Sweden's greatest scientists: a student of Linnaeus, he brought samples of flora and fauna back from China, spent three years on Cook's second voyage, and was professor in the School of Surgery. He became known as a collector of natural objects and was a friend of Ahlgren and the skull came into Sparrman's collection.

The information about Hof is in a biography of Queen Christina by Johan Arckenholtz. It also states that the author had acquired a part of the skull, the rest is held by M. Hägerflycht.

Lund University holds a portion of a human skull which was believed to be that of Descartes, and it is on display at the Historika Museet in Lund, next to a pair of Queen Christina's slippers. This bone entered the collection in 1780, a gift from a woman with the maiden name Stiernman. In fact Hägerflycht, Stiernman and Celsius at one time each held the skull and the skull fragment. However the skull is not missing this fragment. Today there is little belief that the Lund fragment belonged to Descartes.

So in 1821 the Academy of Science reached a conclusion that the skull they had acquired was indeed that of Descartes.



Portraits of Descartes. (left) from the Louvre Museum, Richelieu, 2nd floor, room 27, painter unknown but in the style of Hals. (right) by Frans Hals, in Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

In the great floods of 1910 and 1912 the collections of the Museum of Natural History were flooded, many artifacts were swept away, the rest were collected and stacked in piles. In late 1912 a collection of letters between Berzelius and Berthollet, published in Sweden, was received by the academy. This reawakened long lost knowledge and led to the question about where the skull was. That the skull might again be lost became a news story. Eventually a skull matching the description of the 1821 report was found in a jumble of other antique human remains.

The museum director Perrier took the skull to the academy's meeting on Sept 30 1821 and this led to another round of questioning. A panel of experts was formed led by Paul Richer a medical doctor and a painter of great skill.

Richer's approach was based on precise points of reference in the bones that are visible in the face. Working from a painting of Descartes which hangs in the Louvre he had a technical draftsman strip the flesh from the face using high resolution photographs and a camera lucida to create an extremely accurate drawing of the skull of the man in the portrait. Richer himself made an accurate drawing of the skull from the same viewpoint. The two views were superimposed and shown to be very close. Richer had drawings made of other skulls from portraits and these were shown to be dissimilar. This result was headline news in the New York Times and Figaro.

However the painting on which this work was based had uncertain provenance. The painting in the Louvre was believed to be by the great portrait painter Frans Hals but there is no record of Hals and Descartes ever meeting, though the portrait might have been made in Haarlem. Hals spent most of his life in Haarlem and Descartes is known to have visited his friend Father Bloemaert in Haarlem on his way to Sweden.

The painting lacked the essential character of the artist and a painting of Descartes in Copenhagen (now in the Statens Museum for Kunst) is more typical of Hals' style though appearing rough, unfinished and murky. The Louvre portrait is now labelled "after Hals".

Conclusions

In May 1821 Cuvier wrote to Lenoir to enquire about whether the skull had been seen when Lenoir removed the remains from the church of St. Geneviève. Lenoir replied that the remains were recovered from the right of the entrance near where a terra cotta medallion marked the mausoleum of Descartes, and that the remains were very few, no skull, and within a porous wooden coffin. It is possible that Lenoir himself was not even present at the disinterment, and that he later realized the mistake and his subsequent inconsistent stories were an attempt to conceal the error that had been made.

The burial in the church in 1667 was of a copper coffin with a copper sword which was placed into a vault on the southern wall of the church. If in fact Lenoir removed the wrong coffin then Descartes' actual remains were ransacked by revolutionaries or destroyed when the church was demolished to make a road in 1807. Ironically, the skull which was not buried in France escaped the mayhem and remains to this day.

The skull is now enclosed in a safecase in a basement of the Musée de l'Homme (one part of the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle) but a cast is on display.

In 2009 there was a controversial plan to move the skull to the Prytanée military school near La Flèche, which Descartes once attended, but it did not proceed.

In October 2014 the French medical anthropologist and forensic expert Philippe Charlier ran scans on the skull using computed tomography and found a tumour measuring nearly 1 square inch in Descartes' right sinus — an osteoma. It didn't appear to have bothered Descartes, who never complained of the symptoms such as weepy eyes, excess mucus, and an altered sense of smell.