

Press release, 20 November 2009

Relics of Galileo found: two fingers and a tooth

Removed from Galileo's body in 1737 as it was being translated to the Monumental Sepulchre in the Basilica of Santa Croce, these relics had been lost for over a century. A collector's lucky find confirmed by the Sovrintendenza and the Director of the Museo di Storia della Scienza, the future Museo Galileo, where these exceptional finds will be displayed to the public next spring

Florence – Three exceptional Galilean relics, deemed lost for over a century, have been found again by chance by a collector. They will be displayed to the public for the first time in spring 2010 on the occasion of the reopening, after radical re-organization, of the Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza di Firenze, which will then assume the name of **Museo Galileo**.

These remains consist of a tooth and two fingers from Galileo's right hand, removed in 1737 from the great Tuscan scientist's corpse as it was being translated to the monumental tomb in the Basilica of Santa Croce. The Soprintendente al Polo Museale Fiorentino, **Cristina Acidini**, and the Director of the Museo di Storia della Scienza, **Paolo Galluzzi** have confirmed the authenticity of these finds.

This event represents an extraordinary, emblematic seal of endorsement to the *Year of Astronomy*, conferring on Galileo, 400 years after his sensational astronomical discoveries, the universal, solemn and unconditioned homage that was not afforded him in life.

All of the organic material removed from the body has thus been identified and is now in responsible hands. As is known, a finger was already on permanent exhibition at the Museo di Storia della Scienza, while a vertebra is kept at the University of Padua where Galileo taught for nearly twenty years.

This concludes a trail of events that began on the evening of 12 March 1737, a little after sunset, when it was finally possible to transfer the mortal spoils of Galileo and his faithful disciple, **Vincenzo Viviani**, from the secret storage room where they had first been laid to the monumental tomb in Santa Croce, opposite that of **Michelangelo**, where they still remain today.

For 95 years after the death of Galileo (8 January 1642) the unflagging efforts of his disciples and the Grand Dukes to give the great master an honoured burial place had been opposed by the ecclesiastical authorities, resolutely refusing the celebration in a consecrated church of a man condemned "by the Holy Office for an opinion so false and so erroneous", which had brought "such universal scandal to Christianity".

The erection of the tomb and the translation of the relics was an eloquent manifestation of the firm intent of the last Medici sovereign, **Grand Duke Gian Gastone**, to proclaim the autonomy of the State from ecclesiastical intrusion. Giving Galileo an honoured burial place meant not only authoritatively proclaiming the prerogatives and independence of the civil government, but also celebrating the Pisan scientist as a symbol of and martyr to freedom of thought.

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The solemn ceremony was attended by numerous representatives of the cultural world (many of whom belonged to the Massonic lodges then spreading through Florence) and members of the city's most illustrious nobility. Conspicuous for their absence were any official representatives of the Church.

To leave to posterity a faithful record of that memorable event, a notary – he too a member of Massonic circles – was charged with compiling a detailed report. Thanks to this document and the records left by other eye witnesses, we know the names of many of those present and every detail of the ceremony.

Among the many curious episodes reported, the one most surprising to contemporary readers is the behaviour of some of those present at the moment when Galileo's remains were displayed after the coffin lid had been raised.

Giovanni Targioni Tozzetti, a great historian of science and competent naturalist, drew from his pocket a knife, with which organic fragments from Galileo's cadaver were removed. Participating in this macabre rite were the refined scholar of antiquity **Anton Francesco Gori**, Marchese **Vincenzo Capponi**, Director of the Accademia Fiorentina, and **Antonio Cocchi**, the famed physician and man of letters who had introduced Freemasonry into Tuscany.

Thanks to the precious record left by Targioni Tozzetti we know that, from the badly deteriorated remains of Galileo's corpse, three fingers on the right hand (the thumb, index finger and middle finger), a vertebra (the fifth) and a tooth were removed. Targioni Tozzetti later confessed that he had found it hard to resist the temptation to appropriate the skull that had contained the brain of such exceptional genius!

Some of these "souvenirs" of the great hero of science have been carefully preserved to this day: one of the fingers in the Florence Museum, and the vertebra in Padua. The other two fingers and the tooth had been taken by Marchese Capponi. Their history, consisting of continuous changes of ownership, was known up to 1905, when all traces of them disappeared, leading scholars to hypothesize that these singular specimens had been definitively lost.

To our great good fortune, that pessimistic hypothesis has turned out to be erroneous. The Galilean memento recently reappeared at an auction, where it was being sold as a lot whose precise identity was unknown. It consisted of a wooden case of unusual shape, fabricated in the nineteenth century, surmounted by a wooden bust of Galileo. Inside it was an eighteenth-century blown-glass vase containing two fingers (the thumb and middle finger) and a tooth.

Thanks to his competence and sensitivity, a collector (who has asked to remain anonymous) guessed that this singular object must hold an intriguing mystery. He decided to buy it, engaging at once in fervent research to determine its origin and content, research that has allowed him to identify the remains of Galileo.