

Alas, Poor Caravaggio! Did the Famous Painter Die from *Staphylococcus*?



By Alex Berezow, PhD — September 20, 2018



Credit: Caravaggio/Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien [1]

Caravaggio (1571-1610) was an artist who famously painted various biblical scenes, some of which were quite violent. He seemed to be particularly fascinated with beheadings, and he depicted the deaths of John the Baptist, Holofernes, and Goliath (see image) in various works.

Though Caravaggio did not meet such a violent demise, he may have suffered an unpleasant one. A new report in *The Lancet* suggests that the painter died from sepsis (blood infection) caused by the bacterium *Staphylococcus aureus*.

Caravaggio wasn't just a painter. He was also a fighter -- not the heroic or chivalrous type, but more like the street brawling type. He challenged a pimp named Tomassoni to a duel, and he won. But murdering somebody was frowned upon by the law, so Caravaggio fled Rome, eventually making his way to Porto Ercole in Tuscany. Shortly thereafter, he died at the age of 39 and was buried in a local cemetery.

Nobody really knew how he died, so a team of scientists wanted to find out. First, they needed to find the lad, but they didn't know exactly where he was buried. They poked around in the cemetery and found nine potential candidates: skeletons that were male, about 35 to 40 years of age, and roughly 5' 5" tall. Then, using radiocarbon dating, they identified one of the skeletons as being from the early 17th Century. Importantly, the skeleton contained a lot of lead, which is consistent with the historical record that Caravaggio was careless with lead paint.

To further verify that they had their man, the authors switched to biological methods. They analyzed the Y chromosome from DNA extracted from the skeleton and found that it somewhat

matched that of modern-day people who are believed to be related to Caravaggio. (DNA degrades over time, so this might explain the partial mismatch.) Good enough. It's probably him.

How did he die? The authors knew that infection was one of the hypotheses that had been around for years, so they followed that lead. After all, a guy who likes to get into fights is going to get cuts and scrapes. And back in the 17th Century, cuts and scrapes often ended badly. Using DNA and protein detection methods, the authors concluded that sepsis (blood infection) from *Staphylococcus aureus* was the cause of death.

In further support of that hypothesis, the authors noted that one of the bones showed signs of osteomyelitis (bone infection). One of the causes of osteomyelitis just happens to be a blood infection.

Alas, poor Caravaggio! If only he was a lover instead of a fighter.

Source [2]: Michel Drancourt, Rémi Barbieri, Elisabetta Cilli, Giorgio Gruppioni, Alda Bazaj, Giuseppe Cornaglia, Didier Raoult. "Did Caravaggio die of *Staphylococcus aureus* sepsis?" *The Lancet Infectious Disease*. Published: 17-September-2018. doi: 10.1016/S1473-3099(18)30571-1

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Links

[1]

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[2] [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(18\)30571-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(18)30571-1/fulltext)