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Is This the Face of Mary Magdalene?

Scientists were able to reconstruct a face based on an ancient skull—whether it belonged to the Biblical figure remains a mystery.

By Sarah Gibbens
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In a medieval town in the south of France, a crypt tucked beneath a basilica houses one of the world's most famous sets of human remains, a skull and bones rumored to belong to Jesus' companion Mary Magdalene. Now, a scientist and an artist have used the remains to reconstruct what this woman would have looked like when alive.

The facial reconstruction is based on computer modeling of the skull and depicts a woman with a pointed nose, high cheekbones, and a round face. For those who believe these are the bones of Mary Magdalene, this is the face of one of the Catholic Church's most infamous women.

"We are absolutely not sure that this is the true skull of Mary Magdalene," says Philippe Charlier, a biological anthropologist from the University of Versailles. "But it was very important to get it out of anonymity." Charlier performed the reconstruction with Philippe Froesch, a visual forensic artist.

Mary Magdalene has long been a controversial figure within the Catholic church. Beginning around the fifth century, she was depicted as a prostitute, and popular but unproven theories also depict her as the wife of Jesus.

In a 2004 [interview with National Geographic](#), Harvard Divinity School professor Karen King noted that the only conclusive evidence of Magdalene's role points to her as a follower of Jesus. At the time, King alleged that Magdalene may have played a crucial role in developing the early foundations of Christianity.

Rumors that her remains were in the south of France gained popularity in 1279, Rebecca Lea McCarthy wrote in the book [Origins of the Magdalene Laundries](#). Since then, McCarthy wrote, her remains have been "found" in at least five other regions.

Despite inconclusive evidence about what became of Mary Magdalene, Froesch and Charlier wanted to put a face behind the famed Saint Maximin skull.

The two became interested in [the skull](#) three years ago when Froesch was in the south of France to work on a facial reconstruction for a different skull. He took a detour to the small town and, while touring the basilica, explored the crypt where the skull is housed behind an ornate glass case.

Since the skull was last studied in 1974, the glass case in which it's housed has been locked. The researchers circumvented this by taking over 500 photographs that showed different angles of the skull. Based on these photos, they were then able to create a 3-D computer-generated model of the face that showed characteristics such as skull size, cheek bones, and bone structure.

From this information, they were able to glean that the skull belonged to a woman who died at around 50 years old, and who was of Mediterranean descent. The shape of the nose and other features were determined using trigonometric ratios based on characteristics consistent with the skull's age, sex, and ethnicity.

Photographs of hair found on the skull indicated that the woman had dark brown hair, and skin tone was determined based on tones typically seen in Mediterranean women. A type of clay historically used to prevent lice was also seen on strands of the hair.

Some characteristics, such as weight and facial expression, were subject to Froesch and Charlier's interpretation.

According to Froesch, their process is [developed based on forensic techniques developed by the American Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) and is typically used in crime scene investigations.

In the future, Charlier would like to conduct more research with the skull outside its glass case. Techniques such as carbon dating, which can determine the age of an artifact, can be done only by removing small portions of the skull, which the Catholic Church has not allowed.

He also hopes to one day conduct DNA tests on the remains to determine geographic origin.

Both Charlier and Froesch are adamant that the research was conducted independently of the church and as academic research, but they shared the images with religious leaders in the town, who they report were pleased by the reconstruction.

The possibility of working on such a renowned person, Froesch says, "was very emotional work for us."

While the researchers have only a face so far, they hope to one day reconstruct an entire body based off the femur and rib bones associated with the skull.

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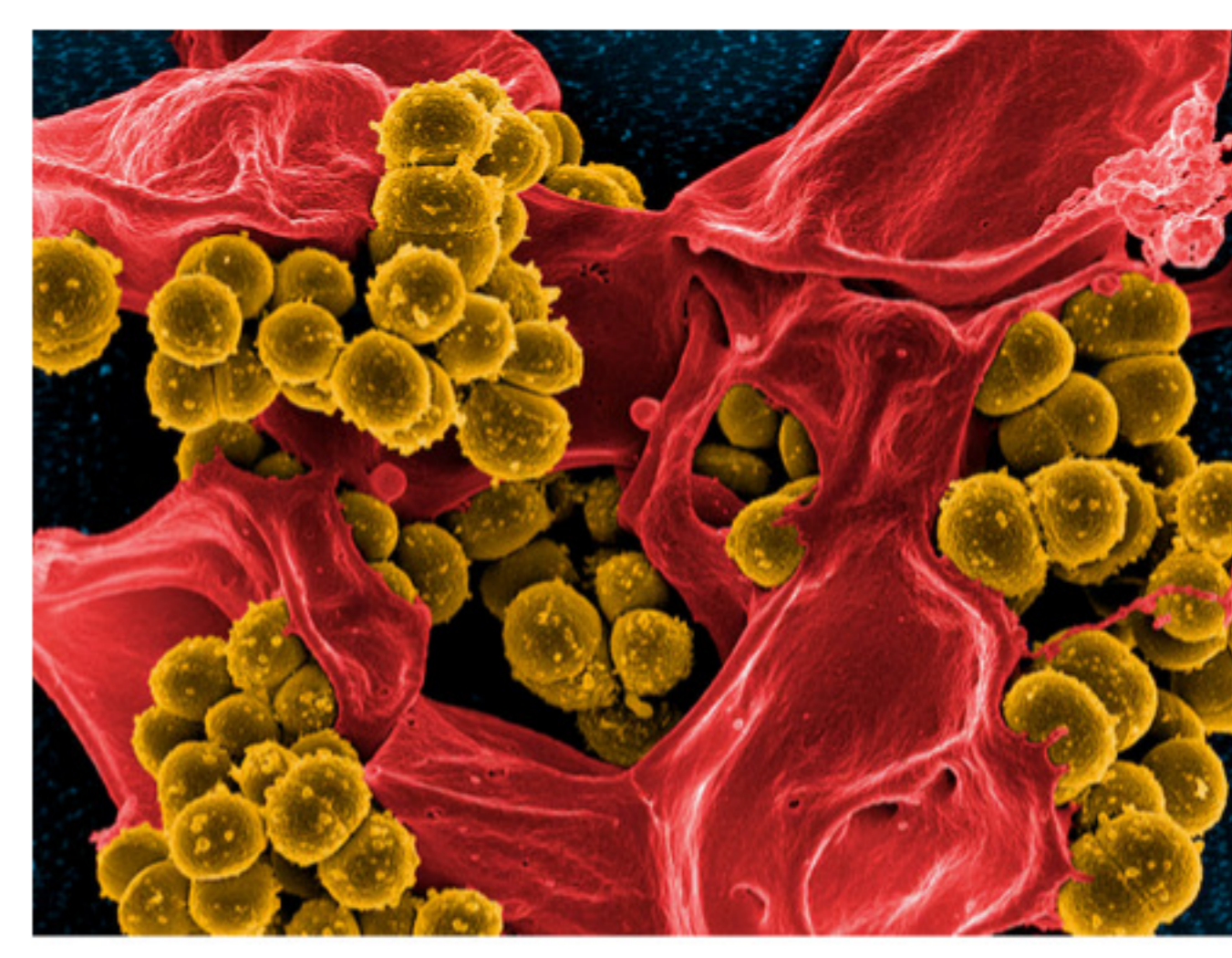
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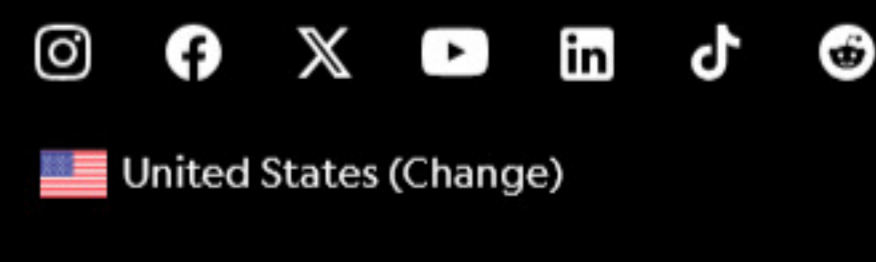
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