

Great Astronomers: Tycho

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Tycho was a Danish astronomer born in 1546 and can be credited with making the most accurate astronomical observations of his time. He was assisted by Johannes Kepler (see May issue of Astronotes) from 1600 to 1601 who later used his research to develop his laws of planetary motion.

Tycho began his education in Copenhagen and followed the desires of his uncle and studied law. However, he also studied other subjects, including astronomy, and this is where his interest began. Tycho had a brilliant mind and by the age of 17 he already had an aim to map the heavens conducted from a single location over a period of several years.

“Tycho also had his insane moments!”

Tycho's main achievements included his ability to catalogue the planets and stars with enough accuracy, to determine whether the Ptolemaic system, in which the Earth is the centre of the universe and the Sun and other objects go around it, or Copernican system, where the Sun is the centre of the Solar system was more valid in describing the heavens. He measured the Earth's axial tilt as $23^{\circ} 31.5$ minutes which he claimed to be more accurate than Copernicus by 3.5 minutes.

A great astronomer he was, but he also had his insane moments! At the age of 20 Tycho lost the bridge of his nose and it was said that he wore a replacement made of gold or silver blended into a flesh tone for the remainder of his life. Although historians have argued that it was more likely to be copper, as it would have been more comfortable to wear than precious metals. He was also fond of a drink, and apparently he used to have a dwarf as a jester and an elk as a pet, which sadly died after drinking beer at one of his parties and fell down the stairs!



Image Credit: via wikimedia.org

The Man with the Golden Nose Tycho had the precious-metal nasal prosthetic installed after losing his original nose in a sword fight. So how did he smell? Probably awful!

There has also been speculation about the death of Tycho. It is thought that Tycho died from mercury poisoning as toxic levels were found in his hair and hair-roots. He may have poisoned himself unintentionally consuming some medicine containing mercury. There are also rumours that he was murdered by Kepler (see Joshua Gilder and Anne-Lee Gilder's book 'Heavenly Intrigue') although there is no evidence to support this. Despite his eccentricities, he was a great astronomer whose research has contributed to a further understanding of astronomy today.