Scientists Identify Head of France's King Henry IV

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LONDON -- After nine months of tests, researchers in France have identified the head of France's King Henry IV, who was assassinated in 1610 aged 57. The scientific tests helped identify the late monarch's embalmed head, which was shuffled between private collections ever since it disappeared during the French Revolution in 1793.

The results of the research identifying Henry IV's head were published online Wednesday in the medical journal, BMJ.

As one of France's best-loved monarchs, Henry IV was credited with brokering peace between Catholics and Protestants, kick-starting the French economy and building Parisian landmarks including the Pont Neuf Bridge and Place des Vosges square. He was the first of the Bourbon monarchs and grandfather of the “Sun King” Louis XIV.

In the scientists' examinations of the monarch's head, they found features often seen in the king's portraits, including a dark discoloration above his right nostril. They also found a healed bone fracture above his upper left jaw, which matched a stab wound the king suffered during a failed assassination attempt in 1594.

Radiocarbon testing confirmed the head dated from the 17th-century. The examiners also compared the embalmed head to an autopsy report describing the particular embalming process used for French kings, written by the king's surgeon.

The French researchers also created a digital facial reconstruction and ran computer tomography scans which showed the skull was consistent with all
known portraits of Henry IV and the plaster mold made of his face just after his death.

Frank Ruehli, of the University of Zurich and the Swiss Mummy project said the research was credible but that it would have been more persuasive if the French scientists had found DNA evidence.

"They've narrowed it down considerably and it probably is Henry IV," he said. "But without the final DNA proof it is hard to say absolutely who it is."

Still, the French scientists did the next best thing, by matching evidence of Henry IV's facial lesion and healed wounds to historical documentation of those traits, which were likely unique to the monarch.

Next year, France will hold a national Mass and funeral for Henry IV. His head will then be reburied alongside the rest of the country's former kings and queens, in the Basilica of Saint Denis.

Questions:

1. When and during what event was Henry’s head stolen?

2. Why is Henry IV considered one of the most important monarchs in French history?

3. What were two distinct markings found on the skull that link it to Henry IV?

4. Why isn’t it known for certain that this skull is Henry IV’s?

5. What is going to happen to the skull since it has been recovered?