LEICESTER, England — For more than 500 years, King Richard III has been the most widely reviled of English monarchs. But a stunning archaeological find this month here in the English Midlands — a skeleton that medieval scholars believe is very likely to be Richard’s — could lead to a reassessment of his brief but violent reign.

If 12 weeks of DNA and isotope testing confirm that the remains found amid the ruins of an ancient priory are the 15th century king’s, those who believe that Richard has been the victim of a campaign of denigration — begun by the Tudor monarchs who succeeded him and deeply entrenched over the centuries in British popular consciousness — hope the renewed attention will spur scholarship that will correct the injustice they say has been done to his reputation.

It is a debate that has raged with varying intensity since at least the late 18th century. And at its heart is this: Was Richard the villain his detractors expediently made him out to be, or was he, as supporters contend, a goodly king, harsh in ways that were a function of an unforgiving time, but the author of groundbreaking measures to help the poor, extend protections to suspected felons and ease bans on the printing and selling of books?

The version that has prevailed since his death, initially nurtured by the Tudors to entrench their legitimacy, has cast Richard’s 26 months on the throne as one of England’s grimmest periods, its excesses captured in his alleged role in the murder in the Tower of London of two young princes — his own nephews — to rid himself of potential rivals.
In Shakespeare’s “Richard III,” and in movies shaped by it, he is depicted as an evil, scheming hunchback whose death at 32 ended the War of the Roses and more than three centuries of Plantagenet rule, bookended England’s Middle Ages, and proved a prelude to the triumphs of the Tudors and Elizabethans.

Even Richard’s burial place was left uncertain, an ignominy deemed fitting by Tudor successors whose dominion was secured when Richard was killed — poleaxed, according to witnesses — at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, then bound, naked, to a horse for two days of public display in Leicester, about 100 miles north of London.

Over the next century, the foundations of the modern British state were laid by Henry VIII, son of the Bosworth victor Henry VII, and by Henry VIII’s daughter, Elizabeth I, and it was during their reigns that Richard’s wretched place in history was set by chroniclers loyal to the new rulers.

It was there that things stood, more or less, until three weeks ago, when a University of Leicester archaeologist working in a trench cut into a parking lot uncovered what could turn out to be one of the most remarkable finds in modern British archaeology. Judging from the clamor that has met the discovery in Britain, it may lead to demands for Richard to be buried, like other British kings, in a place of honor like Westminster Abbey.

The archaeologist, Jo Appleby, noted signature characteristics that pointed strongly to Richard: a deformed spine, what she has described as a mortal battlefield wound in the back of the skull from a bladed instrument and a barbed metal arrowhead found between two upper vertebrae.

The remains were buried in the choir, an area of the priory church where Franciscan monks would have sat during ceremonies, close to the altar. It was in the choir that one of the most credible contemporary accounts said Richard had been interred.

But that pointer proved moot when Henry VIII seized and ransacked the monasteries in 1538, leaving priories like Greyfriars to crumble into rubble, to the point where centuries later, nobody had any precise fix as to where they once stood.

That left the archaeologists to determine, using ground-penetrating radar, where the priory had been. Their big break came when it proved to be not under a 19th-century bank building where local legend and scholarship had placed it, but under the more accessible parking lot across the street.

Within days of starting the dig they had located the remains, which Dr. Appleby and her colleagues later painstakingly transferred to a laboratory in Leicester that the partners in the dig — the university, city authorities, and the Richard III Society, dedicated to revising history’s verdict on the king — have declined to name.

Much now depends on the laboratory investigation, especially the DNA tests on genetic material from the remains that will be compared with swab tests from Michael Ibsen, a cabinet maker living in London, whose mother was a 16th-generation niece of King Richard’s. Other tests will involve carbon dating to fix the age of the bones and the arrowhead, and isotope analysis, which can determine where an individual lived in his early years. In Richard’s case, that would be Fotheringhay Castle in Northamptonshire, not far from Leicester.

Those involved in the Leicester dig say that the scientific tests, like much about the venture, are a “long shot.” DNA testing, they say, can be voided by genetic mutations that have occurred over generations. For that and other reasons, they say, a negative DNA finding will not prove, definitively, that the bones are not Richard’s.
Mathew Morris, an archaeologist who was working with Dr. Appleby when the skeleton was found, was cautious about the discovery: “All the archaeology and the lab testing can tell us is, if it is Richard, is that he had a spinal deformity, the nature of the injuries from which he died in battle and the respect shown to him in the place and manner in which he was buried. It can’t tell us anything about Richard the man. But what it may do is to reignite the debate about whether he was a villain or not.”

Experts involved in the dig have reached some tentative conclusions. Lin Foxhall, the chairwoman of Leicester University’s archaeological services department, said preliminary diagnosis of the curved spine pointed to a condition known as scoliosis, which often causes one shoulder to be raised higher than the other — exactly how contemporary accounts described Richard.

“It doesn’t fit with Tudor sources which portray Richard as a wicked hunchback,” Dr. Foxhall said at a news conference to announce the find. “There was a long history from Greco-Roman times onward of associating physical disability like spinal deformations with negative character traits, a belief that we explicitly do not share today.

“But it does partially explain the Tudor representation of Richard III. The individual we have discovered was obviously strong and active despite his disability. If this individual does indeed turn out to be Richard III, this has the potential for a new and different understanding of the last of the Plantagenet kings.”

Philippa Langley, a screenwriter in Edinburgh who led the Richard III Society’s efforts in pushing for the dig, said she expected that if the remains are proved to be the king’s, it will prompt new scholarship discrediting Shakespeare’s representation of him as “an evil man all the way through, with no redeeming features whatsoever.”

“The truth will turn out to be somewhere in between,” Ms. Langley said. “Richard III was a medieval man, and a medieval king; he was a man of his time. But what we know of him doesn’t stack up to his being a brutal man and a serial killer. Now, perhaps, we can finally get to the real Richard, to the truth that lies behind the Tudor lies.”
King Richard III was the last British monarch to die in battle. Impulsively charging Henry VII at Bosworth he actually killed his standard-bearer with a lance before being carried away from his bodyguard in the mêlée. Losing his horse in the swampy ground he was actually offered another to flee but declared “Today I die a King or win.” Archaeologists announced the discovery of the skeleton in September. They suspected then they might have Richard III on their hands because the skeleton showed signs of the spinal disorder scoliosis, which Richard III likely had, and because battle wounds on the bones matched accounts of Richard III’s death in the War of the Roses. The announcement comes a day after the archaeologists had released an image of the king’s battle-scarred skull. Richard III was born in 1452 and ruled England from 1483 to 1485, a reign cut short by his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field, the decisive battle in the English civil war known as the War of the Roses. [See Images of the Skull & Search for Richard III’s Grave]. The skeleton tells us that Richard III sustained multiple blows to the head from a number of different bladed weapons, suggesting he was ferociously attacked from all sides, probably by more than one person. On 22 August, 1485, at the Battle of Bosworth, Richard III led a mounted cavalry charge against Henry Tudor in an attempt to kill him and end the conflict. During the ensuing fighting Richard III was surrounded by Tudor’s supporters who cut him down. Contemporary accounts generally agree that a blow, or blows to the head killed Richard III, some crediting Welsh foot soldiers armed with halberds as the killers. Some of these accounts are supported by the evidence on Richard III’s skeleton, allowing us to explore possible scenarios for his dying moments. 

The announcement comes a day after the archaeologists had released an image of the king’s battle-scarred skull. Richard III was born in 1452 and ruled England from 1483 to 1485, a reign cut short by his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field, the decisive battle in the English civil war known as the War of the Roses. [See Images of the Skull & Search for Richard III’s Grave]. The skeleton tells us that Richard III sustained multiple blows to the head from a number of different bladed weapons, suggesting he was ferociously attacked from all sides, probably by more than one person. On 22 August, 1485, at the Battle of Bosworth, Richard III led a mounted cavalry charge against Henry Tudor in an attempt to kill him and end the conflict. During the ensuing fighting Richard III was surrounded by Tudor’s supporters who cut him down. Contemporary accounts generally agree that a blow, or blows to the head killed Richard III, some crediting Welsh foot soldiers armed with halberds as the killers. Some of these accounts are supported by the evidence on Richard III’s skeleton, allowing us to explore possible scenarios for his dying moments. 

The announcement comes a day after the archaeologists had released an image of the king’s battle-scarred skull. Richard III was born in 1452 and ruled England from 1483 to 1485, a reign cut short by his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field, the decisive battle in the English civil war known as the War of the Roses. [See Images of the Skull & Search for Richard III’s Grave]. The skeleton tells us that Richard III sustained multiple blows to the head from a number of different bladed weapons, suggesting he was ferociously attacked from all sides, probably by more than one person. On 22 August, 1485, at the Battle of Bosworth, Richard III led a mounted cavalry charge against Henry Tudor in an attempt to kill him and end the conflict. During the ensuing fighting Richard III was surrounded by Tudor’s supporters who cut him down. Contemporary accounts generally agree that a blow, or blows to the head killed Richard III, some crediting Welsh foot soldiers armed with halberds as the killers. Some of these accounts are supported by the evidence on Richard III’s skeleton, allowing us to explore possible scenarios for his dying moments.

The announcement comes a day after the archaeologists had released an image of the king’s battle-scarred skull. Richard III was born in 1452 and ruled England from 1483 to 1485, a reign cut short by his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field, the decisive battle in the English civil war known as the War of the Roses. [See Images of the Skull & Search for Richard III’s Grave]. The skeleton tells us that Richard III sustained multiple blows to the head from a number of different bladed weapons, suggesting he was ferociously attacked from all sides, probably by more than one person. On 22 August, 1485, at the Battle of Bosworth, Richard III led a mounted cavalry charge against Henry Tudor in an attempt to kill him and end the conflict. During the ensuing fighting Richard III was surrounded by Tudor’s supporters who cut him down. Contemporary accounts generally agree that a blow, or blows to the head killed Richard III, some crediting Welsh foot soldiers armed with halberds as the killers. Some of these accounts are supported by the evidence on Richard III’s skeleton, allowing us to explore possible scenarios for his dying moments.

The announcement comes a day after the archaeologists had released an image of the king’s battle-scarred skull. Richard III was born in 1452 and ruled England from 1483 to 1485, a reign cut short by his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field, the decisive battle in the English civil war known as the War of the Roses. [See Images of the Skull & Search for Richard III’s Grave]. The skeleton tells us that Richard III sustained multiple blows to the head from a number of different bladed weapons, suggesting he was ferociously attacked from all sides, probably by more than one person. On 22 August, 1485, at the Battle of Bosworth, Richard III led a mounted cavalry charge against Henry Tudor in an attempt to kill him and end the conflict. During the ensuing fighting Richard III was surrounded by Tudor’s supporters who cut him down. Contemporary accounts generally agree that a blow, or blows to the head killed Richard III, some crediting Welsh foot soldiers armed with halberds as the killers. Some of these accounts are supported by the evidence on Richard III’s skeleton, allowing us to explore possible scenarios for his dying moments.