CHAPTER SEVEN

COPERNICUS’S READING AND PROGRESS TOWARDS HIS FIRST HELIOCENTRIC THEORY

1. Introduction

Copernicus spent the first twenty-two years of his life in Poland in towns along the banks of the Vistula—mostly Toruń and Cracow. In the course of his stay in Italy, he made one journey back to Varmia. Located to the east of the Vistula delta, Varmia was a territory carved out of the Order Estates. Its principal towns were Frombork, Braniewo, Lidzbark-Warmiński, Olsztyn, and Pieniężno.1 In 1510, Copernicus moved to Frombork, and it remained his principal residence to the end of his life. Frombork lies on the Vistula Lagoon (Zalew Wiślany), protected from the Baltic Sea by the Vistulan Sandbar (Mierzeja Wiślan), and fed by the Vistula delta and one of its tributaries, the Nogat River.2 In De revolutionibus Copernicus reports that he made most of his observations in Frombork, and also explains some of the difficulties he encountered because of the adverse conditions of this location.3

Lucas Watzenrode’s episcopal residence was in Lidzbark, not the town of Frombork where Nicholas’s cathedral chapter was located. Nicholas returned to Varmia from Italy in late autumn or early

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1 The German equivalents are, respectively, Frauenburg, Braunsberg, Heilsberg, Allenstein, and Mehlsack (or Melzak). There is another Lidzbark in northern Poland, but I henceforth refer to Lidzbark-Warmiński as Lidzbark. See the map of Eastern Pomerania and Varmia in chapter one.


3 Aside from fog from the lagoon, Copernicus’s tower has windows too small for observation, and the views from the walkways to the south and northeast of the tower make observations to the east, especially the horizon, very difficult. See De revolutionibus IV, 7 and V, 30, in the latter of which Copernicus explains why he had to rely on observations of Mercury that were made in Nürnberg.
winter of 1503. Perhaps after a brief visit to his hometown of Toruń, he immediately went to Lidzbark where he became a part of his uncle’s retinue, traveling with Bishop Lucas on his visitations and participating in official meetings of the Estates. The episcopal residence in Lidzbark was the center of Nicholas’s activities, and he remained there until 1510.4

By that time Copernicus had already collected a few books. With this chapter I begin to focus on the sources available to him as he began his major reformation of ancient astronomy. Proposed dates are not absolutely certain, for Copernicus had acquired some books during his student days in Cracow. We do know with certainty many of the books that Copernicus owned. Some books bear his ownership signature, or there is testimony that he had either received a book from someone or had given it to someone as a gift. We also know several books that are annotated unmistakably in his hand.

In 1626–1627 troops of the Swedish king, Gustavus Adolphus, carted off books from the library at Frombork and took them to Sweden.5 Among them were books owned by Copernicus, books that he annotated, later owned by the libraries in Varmia where he worked, and still other books that he probably consulted for the writing of his major work. Today, most of the books are located at Uppsala University Library.

The most important questions that I will try to answer are about Copernicus’s acquaintance with the works of Plato, Regiomontanus and his circle, above all Cardinal Bessarion, Ficino, and several other sources on which we know Copernicus relied for his discovery of the heliocentric cosmology and his first version of the theory. Above all in this chapter (and in chapter ten and the conclusion), I attempt to clarify as far as the sources permit, why Copernicus bound his heliocentric cosmology so inseparably and obdurately to the perfection of circles and spheres. All of the works discussed below were an integral part of what Paweł Czartoryski calls Copernicus’s “astronomical workshop.”6 These are the sources that informed Copernicus, provided him with facts, observational data, and alternative opinions and theories,

4 Schmauch, “Rückkehr,” ZGAЕ 25, 1 (1933) 225–233, refutes the views of Franz Hipler, Leopold Prowe, and Ludwik Birkenmajer on the date of Copernicus’s return from Italy.
5 Collijn, Katalog, XXI–XXV and 477–478.