Chapter 1

Copernicus between 1514 and 1616: An Overview

1 Copernicus’s Connection

The 1st of May 1514 is the first ascertained date of the circulation of Copernicus’s planetary theory. On that day, the Cracovian physician, historian and geographer Maciej of Miechów recorded in the catalogue of his library an essay presenting the unusual doctrine of the motion of the Earth and the immobility of the Sun: “A quire of six leaves (sexternus) of a theory asserting that the Earth moves whereas the Sun is at rest.”¹ This entry refers almost undoubtedly to the first presentation of Copernicus’s astronomical conception, a manuscript generally known as De hypothesibus motuum coelestium commentariolus (Brief Commentary on the Hypotheses of Heavenly Movements), only three copies of which, as far as we know, have been preserved up to the present day.²

Nicholas Copernicus was then a canon of the Chapter of Frombork in Varmia. Although he lived in an apparently isolated Baltic region subject to the King of Poland, he and his close friends kept up correspondence with many scholars in different countries, in the Polish capital Cracow, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Flanders. Their network facilitated the first propagation of Copernicus’s views even before the completion and publication of his major work, De revolutionibus orbium coelestium (The Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres), printed in Nuremberg in 1543. In the thirty years between the Commentariolus and the publication of his mature and extended work on mathematical astronomy, he keenly attended to the recording of astronomical data and to the improvement of astronomical parameters and geometrical models.³ Notably, one can trace a first reception of Copernicus, however limited, already in this period.

With its university, humanist milieu and court, Copernicus owed his cultural background to Cracow. He studied liberal arts at Jagellonian University between 1491 and 1495, and maintained academic contacts there throughout

² Cf. Biskup, Regesta, 50, n. 55: Nationalbibliothek of Vienna (manuscript 10530), Kungliga Vetenskapsakademiens Bibliotek of Stockholm (Ms Copernicus) and University Library of Aberdeen, Special Collections Centre (πf 521 Cop2²).
³ Cf. Swerdlow-Neugebauer, Mathematical Astronomy, 64–72.
Therefore, Cracow played a significant role both in his formation and in the establishment of his fame even during his own lifetime. As a student he was able to benefit from a consolidated tradition in astronomy. According to Hartmann Schedel’s *Liber chronicarum* (*Book of Chronicles*, 1493), no German university could compare to Cracow in this discipline: “The study of astronomy flourishes […] and nowhere in Germany can one find it more eminent than here.” Later, Copernicus maintained correspondence with the cartographer and historian Bernard Wapowski, to whom he addressed, on 3 June 1524, a letter on the motion of the fixed stars in which he criticized Johannes Werner’s *De motu octavae sphaerae* (*The Motion of the Eighth Sphere*). Given the friendly relations between Copernicus and Wapowski, it is plausible that he was the person who received the copy of *Commentariolus* registered in Maciej of Miechów’s library. Wapowski acted as a mediator and promoter of Copernicus on another occasion, shortly before his death. In 1535, in fact, he sent to Sigismund Herberstein in Vienna an almanac of his friend’s which was derived from his new astronomical tables.

Copernicus was already appreciated for his astronomical talent in Italy as well, where he continued his studies. He attended courses in law and medicine between 1496 and 1503 at Bologna, Padua and Ferrara, where he eventually graduated in canon law. In Bologna, he was appointed by the mathematician Domenico Maria Novara as a collaborator and a witness of astronomical observations (*adiutor et testis observationum*). Some of the records from that period are registered in *De revolutionibus*. According to the report of his pupil Rheticus, Copernicus also held some public lectures on astronomy in Rome around 1500. After he returned to Poland (1503), the Bishop of Fossombrone

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10 GA VIII/1, 6.


12 GA VIII/1, 6; Biskup, *Regesta*, 42, n. 36.