



The Scientific Revolution: Its Classical and Christian History with Dr. Ted Davis

Lecture 12.1: Copernicus Moves the Earth: What He Did and What it Meant, Part 1

Outline:

Copernicus Moves the Earth: Who He Was

- Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543)
- Mikotaj Kopernik was named after his father, a successful copper merchant. His mother, Barbara Watzenrode, was a daughter of a wealthy landowner. Her brother, a priest would later become Bishop of Warmia – and enormously influential on his nephew.
- Better known by his Latin name of Nicolaus Copernicus, he was born February 1473, two years before Michelangelo. One of four children, he spoke German but was subject to the Polish king.
- Copernicus' father died when he was 10 years old. From that point on his uncle Lukasz Watzenrode, a canon at the cathedral in Frombork, took a very active interest in his two nephews. He planned to provide for them by having them also made canons in the Roman Catholic Church – for which an education was needed. Later Lukasz became bishop of Warmia – and also the secular ruler of that region.
- With support from their uncle, in fall 1491 Copernicus and his brother entered the Collegian Maius at the University of Krakow, the second oldest university in Central Europe. He was accepted as a student by the faculty of arts – everything except medicine, theology, and law.
 - Astronomy, astrology, and theology are all part of an astronomy textbook from Krakow.
- Krakow was famous at the time for the study of both astronomy and astrology. Copernicus probably took several astronomy courses there, but we have no records showing which courses they took. Apparently, they did not complete their degrees before leaving Krakow after four years in the spring of 1495.
- There were not yet openings for the Copernicus boys to become canons, so their uncle sent them to Italy for more education. They first went to Bologna, the oldest university in the world, where their uncle had studied law. Copernicus studied canon law (church law), since that is what applied in Warmia, ruled by his uncle. While in Bologna, the brothers were elected canons.



- Copernicus then studied medicine at the University of Padua – later known as “Doctor Nicolaus,” although he had no medical degree, he practiced medicine in Warmia.
- Finally, he moved once more, to the University of Ferrara, where he received a doctorate in canon law (it was less expensive to graduate there) in May 1503. He returned home to serve as a canon – an administrative and clerical assistant to the Bishop – for the rest of his life.
- Copernicus was probably not, however, an ordained priest; he was in charge of an altar and read the liturgy, but did not administer the mass.
 - At first, he stayed with his aging uncle at Lidzbark Castle to serve as his physician and assistant.
- In 1510, Copernicus moved to Frombork on the Baltic coast, where he stayed for much of his life. There, he wrote a treatise on money that anticipates Gresham’s law and helped to reform the currency; kept track of land transfers and other legal paperwork; treated the sick; prepared for war; and made astronomical observations. “The remotest corner of the earth,” he later called it.
 - He owned horses, a house in town, and a tower at the castle where he made his observations. A very comfortable life for a quiet man.
- Relatively few details of his personal life are known; an early biography by his friend Joachim Rheticus was lost before it could be published. Later in life (1530s), he probably had a lover: a woman named Anna Schillings who was his housekeeper for a few years; she later married but soon separated from her impotent husband. Copernicus and her father were both guardians for a group of orphans.
 - The bishop, Johannes Dantiscus, ended their relationship; he dealt with some other wayward canons as well. Dantiscus also issued a general warning about the danger of the Protestant heresy in March 1539, making it illegal for Protestants to live in his territory and outlawing Protestant writings.
 - Copernicus probably hoped for a reconciliation with the Lutherans, and perhaps Dantiscus knew this. Years earlier, Copernicus’ close friend Tiedemann Giese, a former canon at Frombork, had published his own 110 theses, conciliatory toward Lutherans, at Krakow; he stated in the preface that Copernicus had urged him to publish them.