

PEOPLE MENTIONED OR ALMOST MENTIONED IN A WEEK:

NICOLAS COPERNICUS



1473

February 19: Nicolas Copernicus was born at Torun in Poland.

1483

Nicolas Copernicus's father died.

1489

Lukasz Watzenrode, Nicolas Copernicus's maternal uncle and guardian, was elected Bishop of Warmia.

1491

Nicolas Copernicus left the parish school of St. John, Torun for the university in Kraków. He would be studying there until 1495.

1496

Nicolas Copernicus began legal studies at Bologna.

1497

Nicolas Copernicus joined the Chapter of Warmia. His name was entered into the students' corporation book. He would, in absentia, through vicars, function as Canon of Frombork.

1500

Nicolas Copernicus articulated in the Pontifical Chancery at Rome. He delivered a public lecture on mathematics.

1501

Nicolas Copernicus completed his 4th year of studies. His 3-year leave of absence from his duties as Canon to the Chapter House expired. He traveled to Frombork and requested a further 2-year extension in order to complete his studies, and the Chapter granted this extension. He began the study of medicine at Padua while continuing to read for the law.

1503

Nicolas Copernicus (at age 30) received another appointment as Canon-Scholar at the Holy Cross Church in Wroclaw (he would hold this post in absentia through the services of vicars). He was awarded the degree of Doctor of Canon Law at Ferrara. He completed the 2d and final year of medical study at Padua and became licensed to practice medicine.

1504

From this year until 1507, Nicolas Copernicus and his uncle, the Bishop of Warmia, would be attending local congresses of the Estates, *i.e.*, conventions for the election and instruction of local deputies to the lower house of the Polish Parliament (Sejm) in Royal Prussia, at Malbork, Elblag, and Torun.

1507

The Chapter of Nicolas Copernicus sent him to be private physician to the Bishop. He worked on his *COMMENTARIOLUS*, in which he would present theories of the motions of celestial bodies (this included the 1st synopsis of his heliocentric theory). He would distribute his treatise to various persons by way of a series of letters.

1509

Nicolas Copernicus left the Bishop's Court at Lidzbark Warminski and until sometime during the following year would reside at Frombork.

1510

During this year and the following two, Nicolas Copernicus would be, for the Poznan convention of the King's Council, drawing a map of Warmia and the western borders of Royal Prussia. During this activity he continued to hold both the office of Chancellor and the office of Visitor in his Chapter House.

1511

Nicolas Copernicus was appointed Chief Bursar for his Chapter.

1512

Nicolas Copernicus and the other members of the Chapter of Frombork swore allegiance to King Sigismundus I of Poland. For this year and the following one he would be reappointed as Chancellor of the Chapter. In *COMMENTARIOLUS*, he acknowledged that Aristarchus had been correct some two millennia earlier, in inferring that the earth and the other planets turn around the sun, and that the Arab astronomer Ibn al-Shatir had likewise been correct in his theory of planetary motion five generations before Copernicus was born (it is, of course, a signal mark of genius, this ability to admit that someone else is right).



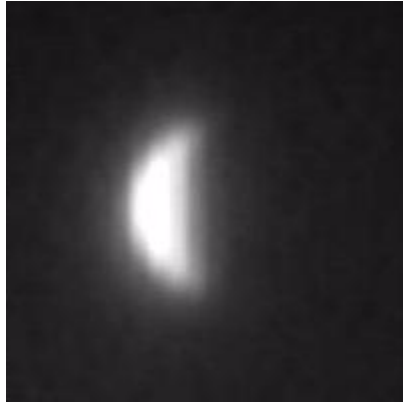
(This, therefore, seems the appropriate place at which to insert some interesting material about the Copernican model of the sun-centered solar system.)

In case you hadn't noticed, there's a mistake about the history of astronomy embedded in the "Friday" chapter of Thoreau's of A WEEK:



A WEEK: The anecdotes of modern astronomy affect me in the same way as do those faint revelations of the Real which are vouchsafed to men from time to time, or rather from eternity to eternity. When I remember the history of that faint light in our firmament, which we call Venus, which ancient men regarded, and which most modern men still regard, as a bright spark attached to a hollow sphere revolving about our earth, but which we have discovered to be **another world**, in itself, – how Copernicus, reasoning long and patiently about the matter, predicted confidently concerning it, before yet the telescope had been invented, that if ever men came to see it more clearly than they did then, they would discover that it had phases like our moon, and that within a century after his death the telescope was invented, and that prediction verified, by Galileo, – I am not without hope that we may, even here and now obtain some accurate information concerning that OTHER WORLD which the instinct of mankind has so long predicted. Indeed, all that we call science, as well as all that we call poetry, is a particle of such information, accurate as far as it goes, though it be but to the confines of the truth. If we can reason so accurately, and with such wonderful confirmation of our reasoning, respecting so-called material objects and events infinitely removed beyond the range of our natural vision, so that the mind hesitates to trust its calculations even when they are confirmed by observation, why may not our speculations penetrate as far into the immaterial starry system, of which the former is but the outward and visible type? Surely, we are provided with senses as well fitted to penetrate the spaces of the real, the substantial, the eternal, as these outward are to penetrate the material universe. Veias, Menu, Zoroaster, Socrates, Christ, Shakespeare, Swedenborg, – these are some of our astronomers.

What Thoreau was passing along here was during his lifetime a familiar urban legend. According to this received anecdote which Thoreau was unwittingly passing along, Nicolas Copernicus had been confronted over his theory of a heliocentric solar system by a defender of the received Ptolemaic earth-centered system, with the challenge that were his new and novel theory correct (which of course it was not), then planets such as Venus ought to be exhibiting phases similar to that of our moon (which of course they do not). Copernicus supposedly responded to this straight man that we were probably going to find out eventually that planets such as Venus **do** exhibit phases similar to that of our moon:



Venus, April 25, 2004



Venus, May 12, 2004

(Photographed through a Galilean telescope)

This is the sort of urban legend that starts with a famous name and celebrates it for its righteousness, by way of contrast with some anonymous boob who is insisting on an outmoded and false piece of received wisdom. The mere recounting of such a supposed snippet of antique conversation is adequate to reinforce us in our feelings of modernity and of righteous superiority.

In other words, there's a payoff. We get an ego boost for being willing to believe that this urban-legend conversation actually happened: we're so bleeding correct that we're right up there in the Hall of Fame with this Mr. Smart-Guy-Who-Originally-Figured-It-All-Out Copernicus!

However, suspiciously, this anecdote about Saint Nick's alleged conversation is one that somehow had failed to surface in the literature, until the 1st part of our 18th Century. The 1st record we have of it is in Professor John Keill's *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TRUE ASTRONOMY...*,¹ published and republished in the early years of the century, and then also specifically in 1738, in Robert Smith's *A COMPLEAT SYSTEM OF OPTICKS...*² Neither author was able to cite, exactly how they had come up with this nice-sounding story. That is, on the simple basis of a suspicious lapse of time this probably is an unsubstantiated fabrication. Copernicus had by the 18th Century been dead for lo these many years. How then were these two historical writers, after such a lapse of generations, able to collect a nice anecdote not previously of record? –No, somebody has made this one up, has made it up out of whole cloth. It is one of those just-so fabrications that are too good not to be true. That the Copernicus anecdote does not hold water, however, can be seen not only on grounds of lack of historical evidence but on theoretical grounds as well. If we consider that regardless of whether we are thinking in terms of the Ptolemaic earth-centric solar system, or of the Copernican sun-centric solar system, if the planets are reflecting their illumination from the sun then from the point of view of the earth they **are** going to be displaying phases, in a manner similar to the manner in which our moon displays phases. Irregardless. (The phases of the planets may or may not be visible with a given power of primitive telescope, but they will nevertheless be occurring. Their phases will be somewhat different, if the sun is in orbit about the earth or is at the center of the solar system, providing a test of whether it is the the Ptolemaic system or the Copernican system that is correct.) It is almost as if Copernicus were being portrayed as having been a person who had failed to comprehend the Ptolemaic system — nope, if there is anybody who could be said to for certain sure

1. Professor John Keill had published his lectures originally in 1718, as *INTRODUCTIO AD VERAM ASTRONOMIAM, SEU LECTIONES ASTRONOMICAE*. This had been republished in English translation in 1721, the year of his death, with emendations, as *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TRUE ASTRONOMY; OR, ASTRONOMICAL LECTURES, READ IN THE ASTRONOMICAL SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD*. I do not know whether the spurious anecdote is new to the 2d English edition, published in 1730, or was already present in the 1st English edition published in 1721, or was already present in the Latin original edition of 1718.

2. Robert Smith. *A COMPLEAT SYSTEM OF OPTICKS IN FOUR BOOKS, VIZ. A POPULAR, A MATHEMATICAL, A MECHANICAL, AND A PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISE. TO WHICH ARE ADDED REMARKS UPON THE WHOLE*. Cambridge, 1738, two volumes.

have had an excellent grasp of precisely what the Ptolemaic system amounted to, this would had had to have been originally Ptolemy, and finally Copernicus!

There is another way to establish that this anecdote is a spurious one. Ask yourself, in what year of what century did we first learn that the planets are dark bodies, that emit no light, shining only in the reflected light of the sun — that they are like our moon (we've known since the time of Anaxagoras that moonlight is reflected sunlight), rather than like the self-radiant stars? I don't know the precise year in which we learned this fact about the solar system, but for sure, it was after the death of Copernicus. Kepler, for instance, believed that the planets were glowing of their own light. Nicolas Copernicus was probably like every other astronomer of his day, in presuming that Venus and the other planets were glowing in the night sky of their own radiance, rather than reflecting the light of the sun. It was considerably later that the planets were put into the same category as our moon, as dark bodies.

The John Keill/Robert Smith anecdote above really didn't last all that long. By midcentury, specifically by 1748, Thomas Rutherford, in his *A SYSTEM OF NATURAL PHILOSOPHY, BEING A COURSE OF LECTURES ... WHICH ARE READ IN ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE CAMBRIDGE*, had pointed up the spurious nature of this anecdote.³ By the time Thoreau heard and recorded this urban legend, it had been being dismissed as a false record by our astronomers for a full century.

1513

In response to an appeal by the Lateran Council, Nicolas Copernicus compiled a proposal for the reform of the calendar and sent it to Rome.

1514

From this point until 1516, the Frombork Chapter relieved Nicolas Copernicus of his administrative duties. He purchased a house convenient for his sky observations and had a platform added to its back to support his astronomical instruments.

3. Cf. page 782 of his Volume II: "it is very strange that a defender of Ptolemy's system should make such an objection as this to Copernicus's system, and not less strange that Copernicus should make this answer."

1516

Nicolas Copernicus was promoted to be the administrator of his Chapter's property, performing his duties from Olsztyn.

1517

Nicolas Copernicus carried out 29 rural inspections, and arranged to have unpopulated areas in his Chapter's estates settled.

1518

Nicolas Copernicus carried out 16 rural inspections. After a hiatus of a number of years, he resumed his observations of the motions of the planets.

1519

In this year the the following one there would be war between Poland and the Teutonic Knights. Taking part in Poland's war effort, Nicolas Copernicus drew up a map of the western part of the Vistula delta. During this year he also completed the 1st draft of his treatise on the minting of money and submitted it to the convention of the Prussian Estates. He carried out 18 rural inspections. He resigned as the administrator of his Chapter and resumed his former position as chancellor of the Frombork Chapter.

1520

Nicolas Copernicus was part of the Polish embassy to the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights requesting the restoration of Braniewo, which they had captured. He was reappointed administrator of his Chapter's property. He organized the defence of Olsztyn against the Teutonic Knights.

1521

Nicolas Copernicus was appointed commissioner for Warmia, with the task of negotiating for the Warmian territories seized by the Teutonic Knights. He resigned as administrator and moved back to Frombork, accepting an appointment as Visitor.

1522

At the Congress of the Estates of Royal Prussia at Grudziadz, Nicolas Copernicus delivered remarks in regard to the minting of coinage.

1523

Nicolas Copernicus was appointed as general administrator for the See of Warmia. During this year and the following one he would be serving both as his Chapter's envoy and as its chancellor.

1524

Nicolas Copernicus's *DE OCTAVA SPHOAERA* (a treatise addressed to Bernard Wapowski, Canon of the Church at Kraków and Secretary to the King of Poland) invalidated the calculations of what was known as the "Motion of the Eighth Sphere," done by an astronomer-wannabee of Nuremberg, Joannes Werner. He was reappointed as chancellor of his Chapter and as envoy of his Chapter.

1526

Nicolas Copernicus assisted Bernard Wapowski, the King's Secretary, in the mapping of the kingdom of Poland and of the grand duchy of Lithuania.

1528

Nicolas Copernicus worked on the final draft of his treatise on the minting of money. During this year and the following one, he would be serving as chancellor of his Chapter.

1530

From this year until 1532, Nicolas Copernicus would be serving as purveyor to the Chapter of Frombork.

1531

Nicolas Copernicus was reappointed as Visitor for his Chapter, and would serve in that capacity until 1537.

1533

Late June-Early September: There was yet another bright comet, as in the previous year and in the year before that. This one was visible for 80 days, as it appeared to transit from the constellation of northern Auriga through Perseus and western Cassiopeia, into Cygnus. Nicolas Copernicus would get a chance to see this one.

1537

Nicolas Copernicus received royal confirmation of his candidacy, as one of four contenders for appointment to the See of Warmia. During this year and the following one he would serve as inspector of arms and defences in the fortress of Frombork, and as supervisor of wills.

1538

Nicolas Copernicus resigned as canon of the Church of the Holy Cross in Wroclaw (a locale he had never visited, where a local vicar had been acting in his stead). He was appointed as deputy for his Chapter.

During this year and the following one, Bishop Joannes Dantiscus (or, Dantyszek) would be proceeding against Nicolas Copernicus on the charge of keeping his housekeeper as a mistress. When Copernicus would comply with an instruction to dismiss this woman, the canon law proceedings against him would be dropped.

1539

Georg Joachim von Lauchen, AKA Rheticus, professor of mathematics at Wittenberg, visited Nicolas Copernicus to learn more about his theory and to assist in publication of the manuscript that would be *DE REVOLUTIONIBUS ORBIUM COELESTIUM*.

1540

Nicolas Copernicus was appointed the Chief Treasurer of his Chapter's building fund.

1541

After many revisions, Nicolas Copernicus delivered to Georg Joachim von Lauchen, AKA Rheticus, professor of mathematics at Wittenberg, for publication, the manuscript of his *DE REVOLUTIONIBUS ORBIUM COELESTIUM*.

1542

Nicolas Copernicus's book on trigonometry, an extract from certain chapters of his *DE REVOLUTIONIBUS ORBIUM COELESTIUM*, was published at Wittenberg.

1543

The *DE REVOLUTIONIBUS ORBIUM COELESTIUM* of Nicolas Copernicus was published at Nuremberg.



May 21: Nicolas Copernicus died.



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This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, upon someone's request we have pulled it out of the hat of a pirate that has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (depicted above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of data modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture. This is data mining. To respond to such a request for information, we merely push a button. Commonly, the first output of the program has obvious deficiencies and so we need to go back into the data modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and do a recompile of the chronology - but there is nothing here that remotely

resembles the ordinary "writerly" process which you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

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